

The performance of nobility in early modern European literature

David M. Posner



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1 Introduction: “The Noble Hart”

Edmund Spenser summed up the aspirations of a class and an age when he described, in the *Faerie Queene* (I, v, 1, 1–4), the state of mind of the Redcrosse Knight on the eve of a great tournament:

The noble hart, that harbours vertuous thought,
And is with child of glorious great intent,
Can never rest, untill it forth have brought
Th' eternal brood of glorie excellent...

This image of nobility – as something pure, unmediated, even innocent – is one which late Renaissance nobility liked to hold of itself, at a time when the possibility of artless, unconstrained public self-presentation seemed as if it were rapidly being foreclosed. The historical position and identity of the nobility were being threatened by the rise of the modern nation-state and the new power and importance of the princely court. A nostalgic yearning for a Golden Age of artless self-presentation thus formed an important part of the ideology of nobility in this period. Spenser’s text itself executes a double movement of optimism and despair; even as these lines enunciate the idealized image of the “noble hart,” they simultaneously suggest the impossibility of its realization. This comes about both through the self-conscious archaism of the *Faerie Queene* as a whole, situating itself in a nostalgically viewed and no longer accessible past, and through this passage’s insistence on the inability of that “noble hart” to rest, to be content, until it has attained the “eternal … glorie” – that is, the public fame, the perfect reputation always still to be achieved – that will render it immortal. In Spenser, internal virtue is not enough for the noble soul; that soul cannot rest, indeed noble identity cannot be said to exist, until it is confirmed in front of an audience.¹ It is this imperative of display, of the public performance of nobility, that is the subject of the present work.

The link between theatricality and ideas of nobility and courtly behavior in the late Renaissance, hinted at here in Spenser, is made far more explicit by other Renaissance writers, who regularly use the metaphor of the theatre to describe both the court and noble identity. To be sure, this usage

is in part just another version of the ancient commonplace of the *theatrum mundi*;² but for authors and readers of the period, who are often themselves players on the stage of the court, it seems to acquire a particular urgency.³ The present inquiry will investigate the reasons for this urgency and its futility. Starting with the concept – new in Spenser’s time – of nobility as a quasi-theatrical performance before a courtly audience, and taking into account Renaissance sociopolitical and ideological contexts, I will investigate why nobility seems to become more difficult both to act out and to define as the Renaissance draws to a close. Building on the work of Norbert Elias, Stephen Greenblatt, and others, this study seeks ultimately to work towards an understanding of the role of literature both in analyzing and in shaping social identity. Elias’s theatrical model of the absolutist court of Louis XIV, in which role-playing acts to suppress individual affect in the interests of the king and the State,⁴ is counterbalanced by Greenblatt’s model of Elizabethan and Jacobean court society, in which the courtly performer constantly adapts to the shifting matrix of power relations in the court, fashioning identities appropriate to whatever circumstances arise.⁵ Where, for Elias, repression gives rise to civilization and the State, in Greenblatt’s model repression acts merely to perpetuate itself, or to reproduce itself in new forms, a paradigm owing something not only to Elias but also to Michel Foucault. The present study, while indebted to these writers, will emphasize not so much the totalizing energies of the theatre of the court as the tensions and contradictions within it. These tensions – centering around the radical dissimilarity between, on the one hand, the nobility’s literary or imaginative images of itself, and on the other hand its increasingly problematic position in historical reality – eventually doom the court society and its theatrical mode of self-presentation.⁶

Strongly “literary” texts – a loaded term which will be discussed below – best foreground these tensions, which is why I have chosen to focus on them. This is not to say that I have considered them in isolation. While I do not claim to have produced either a political or a social history, projects for which I would in any case be insufficiently qualified, the readings of literary texts here offered are necessarily conditioned by attention to the matrix of historical experience in which the texts themselves are embedded, without, however, thereby reducing the texts to mere appendages of history. While history generates the conditions of possibility for literature, modulating what a given text can articulate or reflect, a text also creates its own re-vision of history, laying claim to a certain (perhaps illusory) autonomy. Whatever its legitimacy, that claim generates a space, a zone of tension, between text and history, and it is this space that the present study seeks to explore.

Forming the backdrop for our discussion is the large-scale historical

debate over the idea that there was a generalized crisis of European society in the late Renaissance and seventeenth century,⁷ and that the nobility were particularly at risk.⁸ This notion of crisis – by now a (much-contested) commonplace – conditions, if sometimes only negatively, most recent work on the problem of noble identity. While aspects of the problem vary with time and locale, its general features are fairly clear, whether in France or in England: a class of persons accustomed to considerable political and economic power and independence, and to a certain monopoly on violence, finds these privileges being challenged by a royal power, or state, interested in appropriating them for itself.⁹ At the same time, this class finds itself facing competition in the form of parallel claims to “nobility” from other groups of persons whose skills are more useful to the new state, and who – owing more to that state’s authority – tend to be more tractable. Each of these two competing groups therefore attempts to define itself against the other, even as they lay claim to the same vocabulary of identity, and compete for the same rewards from an increasingly powerful Crown.¹⁰ Nor is this picture exclusively one of division and conflict; nobles, whether *épée* or *robe*, whether old nobility or “New Men,” operate along with the Crown within a complex web of mutual interdependencies, in which no one element can do entirely without any other.¹¹ This web, however, is anything but stable, and its shifting strands produce a corresponding instability in concepts of nobility and noble identity. Nobility and noble comportment in this period are not a predetermined set of axioms, but rather a series of questions posed and re-posed, whose constantly shifting terms are variously imagined, projected, and described by their supposed or would-be possessors. Efforts by Renaissance nobles themselves, by the Crown or the State, and by contemporary writers on the subject, to define what nobility is, what it does, and who may have access to it, are therefore marked by a contentiousness and desperation mirrored in the descriptive and interpretative work of modern historians. It is perhaps not inaccurate to speak of a “crisis of the historians” surrounding the idea of late Renaissance nobility, so striking are the disagreements among students of the subject. However, the concern of the present study is not to decide whose view of the economic or social status of the various nobilities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Western Europe is, historically speaking, “correct”; instead, we will examine a point on which most students of the period actually do agree: that the nobility found itself, or – more importantly – perceived itself, to be in a period of difficulty, tension, and transition, in which certain previously secure ideas of what it meant to be “noble” were being challenged, modified, or replaced. (Whether these pre-existing models of nobility were in fact as stable as their adherents wished them retroactively to have been is less important than the desire that they be so, since it is this desire that – as will

be seen – both produces and destroys claims to nobility.) In any event, disagreements between Renaissance or modern writers on nobility may reflect, more than anything else, the essential slipperiness of the subject; nobility, far from being what it invariably claims to be – something timeless, immutable, and consistent – is always being called into question by its actual or would-be possessors, as well as interested observers, whether critical or not. Terms and definitions, and the authority to control and manipulate them, are at all times being fought over, both because control over vocabulary is in this case not unconnected with actual political power, and because the terms are terms of self-definition, terms from which individuals construct their own identities.

Recent students of the period have therefore tended to link their examinations of noble identity to larger questions of identity and the structure of the self in the Renaissance and afterwards. Not only literary critics like Greenblatt, Jonathan Goldberg, or Timothy Reiss, but also historians like Kristen Neuschel or Jonathan Dewald, have engaged in a series of efforts to rewrite Burckhardt, searching for the genesis of modern concepts of selfhood.¹² Most of these revisions of Burckhardt's *Entwicklung des Individuums* reject his nineteenth-century optimism – an extension of the optimism of the Florentine *quattrocento* – in favor of a more pessimistic, not to say paranoid, vision of the individual's relationship to Renaissance society. These readings, conditioned to a greater or lesser degree by the Foucault of *Histoire de la folie* and *Surveiller et punir*, tend to see the fabrication of the self as a response to the repressive forces of Crown and State.¹³ From Greenblatt's Thomas More to Dewald's memoir-writers, each critic's subject seems to become, in that critic's hands, the inventor of modern interiorizing subjectivity; this peculiar concidence perhaps means nothing more than that, like Burckhardt himself, modern readers are persuaded by the dazzling rhetoric of Renaissance performances of selfhood.¹⁴ It might perhaps be more judicious to suggest that, while the self is always and everywhere being (in the etymological sense of *invenio*) “invented,” the form taken by the self as *literary* subject, as constituted in writing and print, undergoes a transformation during this period, a transformation conditioned both by the actual political and historical circumstances of the writers and their subjects, and by what they thought those circumstances – and themselves – to be. Our study is therefore concerned with literature's intersection with the *myths* of nobility – imagined versions of what it was or should have been – as well as with its reality.

In what follows, we will begin by seeing briefly how one text in particular, Castiglione's *Cortegiano*, brings to the fore the overarching *topos* of the theatre that will govern the literary discourse of nobility in the late Renais-

sance. This discourse ranges from a literature of overt definitions of nobility, through a series of self-help books addressing the practical needs of actual or would-be courtiers, to more overtly "literary" texts, all of which conceive of the self and its relationship to society in explicitly theatrical terms. The next chapter explores Montaigne's versions of this theatrical model of the self in the dual contexts of his readings of classical texts and his own public career. Montaigne's assimilation and critique of the Italians, and his simultaneous readings of Seneca, Plutarch, and Tacitus, among others, are informed by the practical realities of his situation as a *noble de robe* in late sixteenth-century France. Early on, he posits a neo-Stoic model of nobility in which a radical scission exists between the social self and the "true," extra-social, moral self. He associates this version of the self with a putative transparency of language, and presents it in anti-courtly, anti-performative terms specific to the contemporary discourse of *épée* nobility. However, Montaigne's deployment of this model of identity exposes the instability of any discourse depending upon such terms as *franchise*, *générosité*, and so on, and shows neo-Stoic noble identity to be a mystification-dependent performance like any other. Indeed, Montaigne's conception of nobility depends precisely upon being able to demonstrate that there is an irreducible distance not just between social ("false") and private ("true") identity, but between the subject and *any* identity recognizable as such. The pose of the nobleman as a non-performer, one whose *parole* is a transparent (re)presentation of identity, is simply one performance among many, and the successful nobleman is one who can control and deploy an array of performative selves according to situational demands, while maintaining an essential separation between performer (however defined) and performance. Montaigne's performance of nobility also has ideological dimensions; it is designed, of course, to establish his own noble credentials in conventional *épée*-defined terms, but in so doing it rewrites those very terms in ways that paradoxically make the claims to noble identity of *nobles de robe* like himself more powerful than those of the "true" *noblesse d'épée*. Montaigne brings this about in two complementary ways: through ironizing traditional definitions of nobility, and through a surreptitious replacement of those definitions with others better suited to the growing court society of the late sixteenth century. Central to success on this new stage is the capacity for performance, and Montaigne goes to great lengths to demonstrate his own theatrical facility. Throughout the *Essais*, but particularly in the essays of the third book, Montaigne is able to present to the reader a multifarious array of selves, selves which both reveal and conceal themselves to and from the reader in ways which inevitably implicate that reader. The audience is inexorably drawn into playing an active role in Montaigne's *jeu de miroirs*.

Nascent in Montaigne's text is an opposition, or at least a dichotomy, between "public" and "private" (terms which he negates or ironizes even as his text generates them); but the presence of this quasi-doubling of the self foreshadows a sharper opposition in the next author to be studied, Francis Bacon. His *Essays* bear little real resemblance to those of Montaigne; but, like the *Essais*, Bacon's text bears an isometric relationship, structurally and dynamically, to the model of noble identity it describes. The *Essays* are a kind of manual, although perhaps not in the sense in which they have been conventionally understood as such; rather, they are a text whose rhetorical strategies mirror the performative and interpretive behaviors expected of its reader, the ambitious "New Man" eager to succeed at court. In its quasi-didactic intent, and in the particular form taken by that ædificatory impulse, it is consistent with Bacon's larger interest in how best to convey and understand information, as expressed in such works as the *Advancement of Learning* and the *Novum Organum*, where he says, "[w]e must lead men to the particulars themselves."¹⁵ While the exact content of these "particulars" will vary according to the field of knowledge to which they belong, their structure and presentation will always be similar. Specific quanta of information are presented in an aphoristic discourse that compels assent by seeming clear and self-evident, while imperceptibly leading the reader to look beyond that appearance to the truth of the matter at hand. Bacon acknowledges the initial assent (the "contract of error"¹⁶) produced by the (potentially) specious truths of rhetoric as a tool, to be used to move the mind of the reader/ beholder towards true understanding; however, he also acknowledges – and capitalizes on – the potential for deception, particularly in the arena of what he calls "civill Businesse."¹⁷ He insists in this context on the utility, even the necessity, of the Lie, the performance that deceives the better to persuade; and what began as a quest for truth quickly becomes a drive to deceive without being deceived, to further one's own interests without regard for, and if necessary at the expense of, others seeking to do precisely the same thing. The dangers confronting Bacon's "New Man" produce an imperative of masking and dissimulation; whatever "real," "true" identity the performer in this treacherous court-world might possess is entirely irrelevant, since – if it exists at all – it is essential that it be concealed behind an array of masks. The *Essays* therefore call into question the existence of *any* "private self," or at least any observable one; all that can be seen is the performance. This is true even between friends; in the first version of the essay "Of Frendship," Bacon posits the possibility of a relationship unmediated by masking or performance, but in the final version he rejects even this tentative gesture, and insists that the "frend" functions only as an auxiliary to one's own public performance, extending

its range and effectiveness beyond what it could accomplish alone. In Bacon, what will become the “private sphere” may be imagined, but its realization, in the absolutist realm of Elizabeth and James, remains impossible. Bacon’s consequent avoidance of the subjectivity of Montaigne calls into question the existence of any self other than that self’s various roles on the public stage; when the house lights go up, the actor vanishes.

The next chapter turns to theatre *per se*, specifically that of Pierre Corneille, to explore responses on the stage to theatrical models of the noble self. Much of Corneille’s work may be read as a set of carefully orchestrated variations on a single theme, one which dominates his dramatic *oeuvre*: the articulation of the conditions of possibility for the noble self. Defining that self as a quasi-theatrical role to be performed within a courtly context, he focuses on one particular moment in this theatre of state, namely the conflict, whether potential or real, between an independent-minded nobility on the one hand and centralizing royal authority on the other, with parallels both obvious and subtle with the real political situation of seventeenth-century France. In the theatrical court-world of Corneille, everyone must know their lines; deviating from the script, i.e. the modes of behavior proper to one’s role, whether that role be King, Defender of the Realm, Sage Counsellor, or Virtuous Princess, is the worst possible error, and inevitably entrains the direst consequences.

This is, for example, what separates Don Gomès from Rodrigue in the first of Corneille’s variations on this theme, *Le Cid*; both can legitimately (although not simultaneously) claim to be the Bravest Man in Castille, but Don Gomès’s crucial error is to insist that he personally is essential to the well-being of the State. “Sans moi, vous passeriez bientôt sous d’autres lois, / Et si vous ne m’aviez, vous n’auriez plus de Rois.”¹⁸ [“Without me, you would soon be subject to other laws, / And if you did not have me, you would have no more Kings.”] He fails to realize that the “moi” he considers so indispensable is not he himself, but rather the role he plays in the theatre of the state. His too-close identification with his role makes him a dangerously destabilizing force; he must therefore be eliminated. Rodrigue, on the other hand, while he fulfills exactly the same state-sustaining function, avoids confusing himself (a term which, as I shall attempt to show, is of questionable value in describing the Corneillean model of identity) with the role he plays. He also is willing to play that role in concert with his nominal liege lord, in an elaborate public ritual of mutual admiration, where they simultaneously acknowledge their reciprocal dependence on one another and assert their individual worth as uniquely necessary elements of the State. This kind of performance is possible only if all the actors on the stage speak the same language, the language of honor and nobility, sharing a

common understanding of such key terms of the Corneillean vocabulary as *gloire*, *magnanimité*, *générosité*, *franchise*, *vertu*, and so on, terms which define the relations that exist between the various *personnages*.

Hence, the real conflict in *Cinna*, the next play to be discussed, is a lexical one, in which Emilie and Auguste struggle over who will control the discourse of true nobility. Emilie loses because she tries to retain sole ownership of certain key words, words which must on the contrary remain common property in the interest of the *res publica*. Auguste, on the other hand, triumphs because he is able, at the last, both to recognize that this discourse is public property and to demonstrate, through an act of supreme *magnanimité* – the entire renunciation of any private “self” – his complete domination of that discourse, the very discourse on which his antagonists base their opposition. That dominance can be sustained only because, just as in *Le Cid*, all the characters are ultimately willing to abide by the same set of discursive rules. This willingness evaporates in the plays that follow *Cinna*, and therefore the play’s optimistic and transcendent resolution of the conflict between noble and king in the unique *personnage* of Auguste is without sequel. An elegiac note (admittedly present even in *Le Cid*) therefore comes to dominate the later works. The play of *noblesse* becomes a tragedy of nostalgia, in which the noble hero casts a longing glance back toward a time when men were noble and kings knew their place – a *bon vieux temps* which, like all such entities, seems always to have been written into the past, and to have been replaced by an inferior and corrupt imitation. The tension, in Corneille, between this elegiac vision of an idealized past and the grim reality of the historical present is finally unresolvable, leading inevitably, in such plays as *Suréna*, *général des Parthes*, to the forced exit of the noble subject from the stage.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the performance of nobility has become a dead-end spectacle in which the courtier no longer participates; he merely reads and watches, as if from afar, the odd antics of the “characters” presented on the metaphorical stage of La Bruyère’s text – “characters” which are, of course, distorted versions of the courtiers themselves. The theatre of nobility becomes a tiny theatre of marionettes, in which aesthetic satisfaction comes not from being fooled into forgetting that the puppets are merely puppets, but on the contrary from being constantly aware of all the *ressorts*, from knowing at every instant that one is merely watching lumps of wood being jerked about by strings. For La Bruyère, this is both an aesthetic and a moral imperative; he insists that the reader look beyond and behind the glittering surfaces of courtly performance, in order to perceive the unflattering truths those surfaces strive to conceal. He is nevertheless compelled to acknowledge the persuasive power of those surfaces, and to recognize the difficulty of seeing through them. To avoid

being drawn into this play of appearances, La Bruyère's text endeavors to situate itself – and its audience – “outside” of the world it both inhabits and observes. The noble protagonist moves away from being a *personnage*, performing a role in front of an audience, and towards becoming a *caractère*, under examination by a detached observer; but this movement always remains incomplete. The spectator, in La Bruyère's text, is inevitably and perpetually implicated in the spectacle, and indeed the spectacle itself seems to depend for its very existence on the presence and participation of the observer. Moreover, the mystification upon which that spectacle depends turns out to be irresistible, since the distinction that La Bruyère attempts to establish between *masque* and *visage* depends on the possibility that there are at least some cases where there is no distinction – where the performance is merely a setting forth of unmediated truth, rather than an attempt at persuasive deception or concealment. The problem thus becomes one of distinguishing between “true” and “false” performances, and – despite La Bruyère's strenuous efforts to demonstrate otherwise – it quickly becomes apparent that, for the observer at least, there is no reliable way of telling the difference. The pose of the detached observer, watching with amused indifference the impostures of those performing onstage, is itself a mystification, a rhetorical gesture no different than any other performed within the theatre of the court.

The work of La Bruyère seems to represent the ultimate development, or perhaps the last gasp, of what one might call the literature of the theatre of *noblesse*. It is itself a theatrical discourse, with a succession of *personnages* strutting across its stage, but it is also a meta-theatrical discourse which works extremely hard to unmask the mode of theatricality it describes. As such, it seems to want to leave behind a theatrical mode of presentation and to move towards a novelistic or narrative one, in that it speaks often in the voice of a remotely situated narrator, observing and describing in the third person the phenomena of the court. La Bruyère's text does not complete this movement; but, precisely because of its failure to resolve (or at least conceal effectively) the fundamental contradictions it so strongly foregrounds, it paves the way for the movement towards a narrative mode to be completed in the literature of the eighteenth century.

The theatrical discourse of which the *Caractères* are a kind of culmination is set in motion, in the early sixteenth century, by Castiglione's *Cortegiano*. Its dazzlingly aestheticized vision of courtly behavior, dominated by metaphors of performance and theatricality, engenders a seemingly endless proliferation of texts on questions of nobility, courtliness, and identity, all governed to a greater or lesser extent by the same *topos* of the theatre.¹⁹ The *Cortegiano* can in some sense be held responsible for the entire range of

such texts, from the sophisticated critiques of Montaigne or La Rochefoucauld to the compound platitudes of Camillo Baldi or Eustache de Refuge. While these texts vary widely in complexity and sophistication, they all work within a discourse of public identity whose terms and conditions are largely established by Castiglione. This is not to suggest that Castiglione invents the problem, nor that he is the first to apply systematically the metaphor of the theatre to the question of public identity. On the contrary, the notions of public life as a kind of theatre, and of the individual-as-actor therein, are already commonplaces for Cicero, from whom Castiglione borrows not only the quasi-theatrical form of his work but also a number of key metaphors. But Castiglione's artful reformulations of classical *topoi* of theatricality have resonances for his Renaissance readers that even Cicero cannot always match.²⁰ It would nevertheless be misleading to claim that Castiglione effects a radical reversal of the Ciceronian ideal, or that Cicero himself proposes as his ideal orator a naïvely straightforward Mr. Smith à la Frank Capra. To be sure, Cicero insists, in a famous pun, that the orator should present himself to the public as *actor veritatis*, the advocate – and performer – of truth. However, even as he presents this ideal he complains that orators have abandoned the essential art of *actio* – delivery or performance – to mere *imitatores veritatis*, that is, *histriones* (theatre actors): “Haec ideo dico pluribus quod genus hoc totum oratores, qui sunt veritatis ipsius actores, reliquerunt, imitatores autem veritatis, histriones, occupaverunt.”²¹ [“I dwell on this because the whole area has been abandoned by the orators, who are the performers of truth, and taken over by the actors, who are merely imitators of truth.”] Cicero immediately goes on to insist that the cultivation of this art is essential, since the orator cannot rely solely upon the naked truth to persuade his audience. On the contrary, since the minds of the audience are so often clouded by emotion, the orator must attempt to control those emotions through *ars* and *actio*, in addition to persuading through a rational presentation of truth.²² Indeed, the concluding portion of Book III of *De Oratore*, which follows this passage, is concerned primarily with the application of *actio* to this form of non-rational persuasion, with extensive examples drawn from the theatre.

Castiglione's emphasis on the persuasive effectiveness of performance is therefore a development of something already present in Cicero, rather than a radical turning away from the Ciceronian ideal. The direction of this development is nevertheless significant and revealing. Castiglione recognizes the danger of persuading an audience of something they do not want to hear (a danger equally real for Cicero, although he was perhaps less willing to recognize it), and therefore moves away from the idea that the purpose of persuasion, and of its attendant *delectatio*, is to present poten-

tially uncomfortable truths with overwhelming rhetorical force. The aesthetic pleasure brought to the audience becomes, for Castiglione, more of an end in itself; rather than being in the service of forensic persuasion, it is part of a larger context of princely *otium*, and functions for the performer primarily as a means of attracting favor and *onore* to oneself, and as a means of self-protection.²³ Even and especially when the noble courtier is performing that function most proper to his class, namely making war,²⁴ that activity becomes above all a performance designed not so much to serve the interests of the State as to impress one's employer.²⁵ One should be sure, when in battle, to perform one's heroic deeds as visibly as possible, and if it can be managed, right in front of one's boss.²⁶ The practical results – if any – of this martial performance, and of other, less overtly dangerous forms of showing off, are vastly less important than the perception thereof by the princely onlooker. In the discussion in book II, section 11, of masquerade ("lo esser travestito"), and of its great utility for showing off one's true (noble) identity through disguising it, Castiglione emphasizes that the success of the courtier's performance is determined by the audience reaction, and in particular by whether or not the audience "si diletta e piglia piacere" ["is delighted and pleased"]. Control of that reaction, through controlling the pleasure experienced by the beholder, thus becomes paramount.²⁷ This pleasure arises not from the audience's experience of the showing forth of some Truth, *à la Cicero*, but rather from its being deceived. Castiglione shows that the essence of the courtier's performance is a kind of multi-layered deception, in the form of a performed concealment – a concealment that pretends to be the opposite, to be an intentionally incomplete concealment that instead reveals, with a wink and a nudge, the "truth" behind its supposedly consensual pretense. Through performing "con abito disciolto," in a disguise meant to be seen into, the performer invites the audience to feel as though it is in on the joke. The audience's pleasure arises from its accepting that invitation, from being fooled into believing that, rather than being fooled, it is seeing beyond the mask (representing e.g. a *pastor selvatico*, a peasant) to the "real" (i.e. noble) visage underneath. The precise *locus* of this pleasure, as Castiglione makes clear, is the tension between what is actually seen and what is artfully hinted at, without however being revealed in what Bacon will call the "Naked, and Open day light"²⁸ of Truth. Nor could that shadowy something-hinted-at ever be thus revealed, as it is neither presence nor substance, neither essence nor Truth, but rather the reflection of the desire of the beholder, the very movement of "l'animo ... [chi] ... corre ad imaginare..." ["the mind which rushes to imagine"]. In this specular performance, there is always something more – Castiglione's "molto maggior cosa" – than can be seen, or indeed be present; the desire for that shadowy *cosa* is

the *delectatio* proper to this masquerade, and it is the eliciting of that desire that is the object of the courtier's performance.

The success of that performance, of its come-hither pseudo-revelation, is in turn dependent on a sort of meta-deception, another layer of pretense that likewise attempts to disguise itself as its opposite. The courtier's performance must persuade, but that effort at persuasion must itself be covered over by another persuasive effort, one that "demonstrates" to the audience that no effort at persuasion is being made. One cannot be seen to be doing what one is in fact doing, namely working very hard to persuade one's audience of a noble identity which – if it actually were what it claims to be – would need no rhetorical helps to impose its intrinsic veracity, its mathematical Identity with itself, on the minds and emotions of the audience. That such an effort of rhetoric is in fact needed suggests that the Identity being performed is not what it professes to be, or at least that the person laying claim to it has no intrinsic, "natural" right to do so. Effort must therefore be disguised as its opposite; one must persuade the witnesses to that effort of its absence.²⁹ This is *sprezzatura*.

Although Castiglione, when he introduces the concept (I, 26), coyly lays claim to at least lexical originality ("...per dir forse una nova parola [...] una certa spazzatura..." "[to say, perhaps, a new word ... a certain *sprezzatura*"], he knows perfectly well that he is once again recycling a Ciceronian commonplace. He even throws out a hint as to his source: "E ricordomi io già aver letto esser stati alcuni antichi oratori eccellentissimi, i quali ... sforzavansi di far credere ad ognuno sé non aver notizia alcuna di lettere..." ["And I remember having read about certain most excellent orators of antiquity, who ... tried to make everyone believe that they knew nothing at all about letters..."] The reading here recalled by the Count Ludovico da Canossa is book I of *De Oratore*; and the Count goes on to explain how such pretense made the orators' powers of persuasion all the more effective in the minds of their audiences, commending their example to the would-be courtier. However, Cicero's most explicit theoretical statement about this particular form of deception is found not in *De Oratore*, but in another dialogue, the *Orator*; and, in the tensions between the latter text's *diligens negligentia* and the *sprezzatura* of the *Cortegiano*, we find precisely those features of Castiglione's version of courtly identity that will be most productive – and problematic – for subsequent discussions of nobility and courtly behavior. When Cicero recommends to the orator a kind of studied nonchalance, he does not mean it as a general rule, to be applied to all types of rhetorical performance; the term appears in the context of a discussion of a specific variety of rhetoric, namely the plain style. After pointing out that a certain *non ingrata negligentia*, in addition to simply pleasing one's audience, can lead them to believe that the person

speaking is concerned “de re … magis quam de verbis” [“more about things than about words”], he continues,

…quaedam etiam negligentia est diligens. Nam ut mulieres pulchriores esse dicuntur nonnullae inornatae quas id ipsum deceat, sic haec subtilis oratio etiam incompta delectat; fit enim quidam in utroque, quo sit venustius sed non ut appareat.³⁰

[…there is such a thing as careful negligence. Just as some women are said to be more beautiful when unadorned – it becomes them – so this plain style, even though unornamented, pleases; in both cases there is in fact something that is more attractive, but does not show itself.]

Castiglione appropriates from Cicero the notion of artful artlessness, as well as its seductive effect: that the audience, finding what it beholds “sit venustius sed non ut appareat,” is incited to suspect, and desire, the presence of something more than what is actually seen. (While Castiglione’s rewriting of *diligens negligentia* jettisons the explicit comparison with the woman made more beautiful and attractive by her non-use of external adornments, the model of a seductive *delectatio* is everywhere implicit in Castiglione’s idea of the courtier’s relationship with his or her audience.) But the *Cortegiano* expands the field of application of *diligens negligentia* well beyond the narrow limits of a single style of oratory; *sprezzatura* governs all courtly behavior, and indeed is its essential defining characteristic. Upon it depends *grazia*, grace, which must be seen to accompany the courtier’s every action; upon it depends above all the crucial ability to persuade one’s public of the presence of the “molto maggior cosa,” that Something Else, always just beyond the reach of clear perception, which is the key to noble identity.³¹

For Cicero, as we have seen, the necessity of art, of studied performance, to the rhetorical process is the fault of the audience. The existence of Truth, and of its power to convince, are not called into question; were the audience only able to rise to a sufficiently high level of rationality, Truth would need no help from the orator in order to persuade. Castiglione is less optimistic. The “truth” of public identity is indeed called into question, as it not only should be but must be, since the entire idea of noble identity rests on an impossibly unstable foundation: that peculiar Something Else, always just beyond the bounds of what can be perceived clearly, always suggested but never made wholly manifest. It is that Something Else to which the elaborate, multi-layered deception of the courtier’s performance is always trying to direct the audience’s attention, without being perceived to do so; and if any of the levels of deception should fail, if the audience should be somehow undeceived, the whole performance collapses, and with it the performer’s identity. This is not to say that the performer is necessarily

practicing a consciously calculated deception upon the audience, nor that he is necessarily exempt from that deception. On the contrary, one might say that there is yet another meta-deception, another layer of pretense, one that includes the performer as well; performer and audience are engaged in a contract of mutual or collective deception, since both share the desire that the “molto maggior cosa” be genuinely present, that the performer be what both he and the audience would have him be.

This mutuality is governed by another of Castiglione’s key words, *prudenzia*. Once again, Castiglione borrows a term central to Cicero’s model of the ideal orator, but shifts its meaning to adapt it to a world in which consensual deception, rather than *veritas*, is the substrate upon which relations of mutual confidence are built. For Cicero, *prudentia*, while a useful tool for the orator,³² cannot be divorced from *iustitia*, precisely because such a separation would entail losing the confidence of one’s audience:

Harum igitur duarum ad fidem faciendam iustitia plus pollet, quippe cum ea sine prudentia satis habeat auctoritatis, prudentia sine iustitia nihil valet ad faciendam fidem.³³

[Of these two qualities, then, justice has more power to inspire confidence, since, even without prudence, it has enough authority; but prudence without justice is worthless in inspiring confidence.]

This is not the place to enter into the question of how seriously Cicero intends his own audience to take such a sanctimonious maxim. What is important for us to notice is that Castiglione does not make even this ritual gesture towards anchoring prudence in some sort of moral virtue; his *prudenzia* is rather a question of selecting one’s circumstances, and above all one’s audience, so as to maximize the effectiveness of one’s persuasive performance. The courtier should use (II, 6) “una certa prudenzia e giudicio di elezione” [“a certain prudence and judicious choice”] when for example committing acts of mayhem on the battlefield (II, 7), “per acquistar laude meritamente e bona estimazione appresso ognuno, e grazia da quei signori ai quali serve...” [“...to gain praise deservedly, and everyone’s good opinion, and favor from the princes he serves...”] The exercise of this prudence may lead one to *seem* virtuous in the eyes of one’s audience, to be sure, but virtue is not a necessary precondition. What is important is that one uses one’s *prudenzia* to (IV, 18) “elegger bene” [“choose well”] one’s audience, so that they will be the sort of persons most likely to be persuaded by one’s performance. In other words, they must resemble the performer, at least insofar as they share the performer’s desire for that “molto maggior cosa.”³⁴

For this mutual desire to be realized, for the performance to succeed, the audience must be persuaded; hence, for Castiglione's actor, opinion is the only thing that counts. This is made clear in the odd conclusion of the debate, early in the *Cortegiano*, on the precise nature of nobility, a debate which also owes much to Cicero. In *De Oratore*, the question of the relative value to the orator of birth as opposed to training is expressed in terms of *ingenium* [talent] versus *diligentia* [hard work]. Good genes, Crassus insists, are the first prerequisite to oratorical success (I. xxv. 113). However, Antonius will show that, talent notwithstanding, *diligentia* is indispensable, and indeed can work wonders, even (perhaps) compensating for shortcomings in *ingenium* (II. xxxv. 147–48). Antonius's remark that one of the functions of *diligentia* is to awaken an under-active *ingenium* is echoed in Castiglione's discussion (I, 14) of the *occulto seme* ["hidden seed"], a mysterious entity which appears, as the argument proceeds, to be by turns essential and irrelevant to the actual formation of noble identity. It may be a prerequisite to true nobility, but evidently hard work can compensate almost entirely for its absence; it may "porge una certa forza e proprietà del suo principio" ["grant a certain strength and property of its own essence"] to its possessors, but—as it is, after all, *occulto*—persons possessing it seem nevertheless to need to be "cultivati" through training and hard effort in order to manifest its fruits. It may confer genetic advantages upon its possessors, but there is no guarantee that those genetic advantages will be passed on; and in fact *nobiltà di sangue* seems to act primarily to shame its possessors into living up to the alleged virtues of their ancestors. One may indeed be "nato nobile e di generosa famiglia" ["born noble and of generous family"], but this does not relieve one of the responsibility of acting like it. The noble is, by definition, always attempting to bridge a gap between the unrealized potential of the flawed present and a supposedly actualized ancestral ideal.

The necessity of that attempt is what drives the performance of nobility in Castiglione. The inevitable inadequacy of that performance— one is always trying, or pretending, to be Something Else—and its consequent hollowness are what gives that performance its peculiarly paranoid character. This paranoia in fact pervades the entire text of the *Cortegiano*, but especially here, where it is perhaps closest to the surface, Castiglione is extremely careful to avoid direct confrontation with the inherent contradictions of his subject. The debate on the *occulto seme* is brought to a close, almost apologetically, by Canossa, who says that—like it or not—opinion determines reality, insofar as one's public identity is concerned. He insists on that opinion's inevitable fragility, and fallibility, precisely in order to show that it is essential that one must do everything in one's power to deliver a convincing performance, so as to manipulate the arbitrary—but crucial—first impression to one's advantage. The "truth" of the matter,

whatever that may be, is entirely irrelevant; what counts is (I, 16) “la opinion universale, la qual sùbito accompagna la nobiltà” [“universal opinion, which immediately accompanies nobility”]. The real issue, that the calling into question of any “natural” correspondence between essence and appearance undermines the entire notion of noble identity, is here sidestepped by Canossa and Castiglione, a maneuver that later writers on the subject will be unable to execute so adroitly.

For Castiglione is only a beginning; the *Cortegiano* lies at the root of a vast genealogical tree of texts on the topic of nobility and noble identity. It is tempting to divide this tree into two main branches, representing two strains of writing on the topic, the “literary” and the “non-literary,” *scriptible* and *lisible*, or even “good” and “bad,” and instantly dismiss the latter; this temptation becomes almost overwhelming when one actually reads, for example, *La Guide des Courtisans* of Nervèze. However, as Barthes himself eventually shows, such distinctions tend to be self-negating, since even the least sophisticated of the courtesy manuals is not – and cannot be – purely *lisible*, that is, a completely unselfconscious, rhetorically transparent text. Even these texts are already “about” the reading and rewriting (to one’s own advantage) of the performed text of public behavior, whether one’s own or that of others, which one is attempting to read through. Moreover, whatever Castiglione’s original intent in writing the *Cortegiano*, his book was certainly read by many as a kind of self-help book for the aspiring courtier, and the multitudinous rewritings of it that populate the rest of the sixteenth century tend to present themselves explicitly as instrumental texts, manuals of conduct for the would-be gentleman. The master trope of the theatre, with its associated lexicon of sub-metaphors (the mask, backstage space, staying in character, and so on), suffuses a broad range of texts which, while operating on widely varying levels of sophistication or insight, all share a double concern with (1) the proper interpretation of the courtly theatre of appearances, and (2) perpetuating the system of consensual illusion upon which that theatre depends, by avoiding and concealing the very real historical and logical contradictions at its heart.

Castiglione’s artistry allows him to sidestep these contradictions, but even for him they are always and everywhere present, if just under the surface. The less self-conscious texts are not so fortunate; their more straightforward practicality, and in some cases their lesser literary complexity, mean that they can neither conceal nor overcome the internal contradictions of the social world they represent. We find instead a variety of evasions, rhetorical gestures intended to paper over those contradictions, to render them somehow negotiable to their readers, without however coming to terms with what they represent. Even such a sophisticated

work as Giovanni della Casa's *Galateo* (1558) avoids calling into question the necessity of courtly theatricality. The beginning of the treatise explicitly announces that, since opportunities for its use are few and far between, Virtue writ large is irrelevant to the question of everyday behavior; far more important are small "virtues," like good manners, since they are needed daily.³⁵ He does criticize, albeit obliquely, the artificiality of courtly manners, by claiming that they are not native to Italy, but are a pernicious import. Although he does not here state where they come from, he clearly has Spain in mind, and like Castiglione casts an elegiac glance backwards to the good old days when Italians were free to behave as themselves:

La quale usanza sanza alcun dubbio a noi non è originale, ma forestiera e barbara, e da poco tempo in qua, onde che sia, trapassata in Italia: la quale, misera, con le opere e con gli effetti abbassata et avilita, è cresciuta solamente et onorata nelle parole vane e ne' superflue titoli.³⁶

[This habit is undoubtedly not original with us, but foreign and barbarous, and only recently brought into Italy from wherever it began; our miserable Italy which, degraded and humiliated in deed and effect, now grows and is honored only in vain words and superfluous titles.]

However, the rest of the treatise avoids such questions, and is concerned instead with practical advice on how to conform to the theatrical demands of this postlapsarian society. Most other works on the subject will omit even this sort of token gesture, preferring instead to remain in the realm of what they conceive to be the purely practical. This reduced ambition produces some peculiar results, as in Camillo Baldi's *Congressi civili*, first published in 1637.³⁷ Baldi echoes a great deal of Aristotle, and seems at first glance to be emphasizing the Civil in a Ciceronian sense; it turns out, however, that Baldi's "Uomo dabbene" is instructed not to serve the public good through the *vita activa* but to preserve civil order and tranquillity, on an almost microscopic scale, by being well-mannered towards one's fellow citizens. Another common phenomenon is an explicit, even cheerful, self-contradiction, as in (for example) the same author's *Politiche considerationi* (1625), which advocates and disclaims dissimulation in the same breath.³⁸ Torquato Accetto's *Della dissimulazione onesta* (1641) offers a bizarre reconciliation of these two positions, drawing upon both biblical³⁹ and Classical sources to demonstrate that dissimulation, which he conceives of as a persuasive performance, is not only essential to the well-being of the *res publica* but is the crown of all the virtues.⁴⁰

Likewise, in France, innumerable *livres de politesse* [roughly, "manners manuals"] proffer concrete advice to the would-be courtier, for the most part unencumbered by apparent concerns about contradictions within either their own rhetoric or their subject.⁴¹ These contradictions never-

theless are very near the surface of these texts, and one in particular is both omnipresent and eternally unresolved: namely that in order to lay claim to nobility one must assert that one has always (genetically) been what one claims to be. This is an assertion difficult to sustain for most readers of these manuals, and so Castiglione's deft evasion of the dilemma is not available to them. Outright prevarication is therefore a commonly proposed option. The pragmatic, even cynical, tone of these treatises may also be in part the result of the ever more narrowly defined roles available to the actual or would-be courtier in seventeenth-century France. While early examples of these how-to manuals are often little more than thinly disguised translations or imitations of Castiglione, the genre gradually adapts to its particular situation and audience. Castiglione wrote, albeit in an elegiac tone, for and about an audience of people who were performing, or liked to think they were, in a theatre where the courtier was the primary personage, but the writers and readers of seventeenth-century French courtesy manuals are operating under a different set of circumstances. The courtier is no longer a player in a court where the prince is, or pretends to be, a *primus inter pares*; rather, the courtier now finds himself locked into a pyramidal structure of power, with an increasingly dominant monarch at the apex, to which the courtier must accommodate himself.⁴² This narrowing of options produces a variety of responses, which nevertheless share an acceptance of the inevitability of the performative demands of the court. One of the most common responses is that found in the semi-ironically titled *La Guide des Courtisans* (1610) of Nervèze, who attacks the court in general, and court vices such as dissimulation in particular, in the name of a kind of bourgeois neo-Stoic piety. Even he, however, does not entirely reject a certain post-humanist “prudence,” a balanced discretion which he is at pains to distinguish from courtly feigning. While describing the duplicitous “personnage, que le Courtisan allors joüe ordinairement sur ce Theatre” [“character that the Courtier ordinarily plays on this Stage”], he insists that one must differentiate between the kind of *faintise* [feigning] “qui trompe sous la bonne foy d'autrui” [“that deceives thanks to others' good faith”] and “celle qui agit prudemment selon le monde” [“that which acts prudently according to worldly custom”].⁴³ And elsewhere, while insisting that “... Dieu & la Cour sont deux choses contraires qui font agir diversement” [“God and the Court are two contrary things, which produce different behavior”], he goes so far as to praise the *faintise* of those who manage to be devout while still being good courtiers (*Guide*, 42, 42a–43). Even such an ill-humored anti-courtly text as the *Guide* cannot quite manage to reject courtly theatricality entirely; but other works, such as Eustache de Refuge's *Traicté de la Court* (1616), seem to embrace it wholeheartedly, only occasionally gesturing towards more conventional notions

of moral behavior in passages that seem simply tacked on.⁴⁴ Refuge's well-organized and eminently practical manual has as its governing principle "accortise," a word significantly borrowed from the Italian *accortezza*, which in his hands becomes a kind of mercantile cleverness directed towards maximizing the advantage of its practitioner while minimizing that of others. Refuge makes no effort to pretend that the performance of *accortise* consists of anything except deceiving one's audience, coupled with efforts to penetrate the deception of others,⁴⁵ "avec neantmoins un visage ouvert et agreeable à tous." [“with, nonetheless, a visage which is open and agreeable to all.”] (*Traicté* 96f). The key to maintaining this “Affabilité agréable” is an obstinate averageness, Aristotle's virtuous mean reduced to a flat-footed bourgeois conformity (*Traicté* 4, and 75ff.). That it is a class-specific viewpoint is borne out by the text's anti-aristocratic tone, as well as certain very specific statements, as for example when he characterizes the *noblesse* as “ambitieux, orgueilleux, insolens, ingrats, vindicatifs, arrogantz, ostentateurs & vains, imprudents, avaricieux . . . ” [“ambitious, prideful, insolent, ungrateful, vindictive, arrogant, ostentatious and vain, imprudent, avaricious . . . ”] (*Traicté* 78).

This bourgeois outlook is shared by one of the most successful of the *livres de politesse*, Nicolas Faret's *L'Honeste homme. Ou, l'art de plaire à la Cour*, which first appeared in 1630, and was reprinted and translated many times in the following decades.⁴⁶ This work owes much to Castiglione, particularly in its attempts to define nobility and to discuss the question of heredity versus training. However, where Castiglione ironizes or aestheticizes these unresolvable dilemmas, Faret – lacking his master's *grazia* – contents himself with platitudes and vague formulae, while clumsily leaving the contradictions themselves in the open for the reader to stumble over. Like Refuge, he says that the would-be courtier should be *moyen* [average] in all things, and the goal of this relentless mediocrity is, above all, *plaire* [to please] (*L'Honeste homme* 5). Audience reception is all, and therefore every action of Faret's “Honeste homme” will be directed towards producing an appropriate response. To this end, he will present

les principales qualitez que doit avoir celuy qui pretend passer pour Honeste-homme devant tant d'yeux dont l'on est éclairé à la Cour, et parmy un si grand nombre d'esprits delicats, à qui les defauts les plus cachez ne le scauroient estre long temps. (Faret 12–13)

[the principal qualities that one should have in order to pass for an *honnête homme* in front of the many eyes that gaze upon one at Court, and among such a great number of sensitive *esprits*, from whom the most hidden faults cannot hope to remain so for long.]

There is no question of essence or naturalness here; all that matters is that

one is able to “passer pour Honeste-homme” before the courtly audience. The worst thing that can befall such a pretender is to be caught pretending:

La principale chose à quoy il prendra garde, c'est qu'il ne paroisse point de dissimulation en son discours, & que son visage ne démente point sa bouche, ny ne destruise pas en un moment ce que son esprit aura bien eu de la peine à inventer. (Faret 143)

[The principal thing he must be careful of, is that no dissimulation appear in his discourse, and that his visage does not belie his mouth, nor destroy in a moment what his mind has taken a great deal of trouble to invent.]

This notion of the courtly self as an entity that needs careful planning, elaborate preparation, and flawless performance is certainly at odds with his assertion, repeated throughout the treatise, that, while one’s reputation – and, indeed, existence – as a courtier are dependent upon “opinion,” i.e. audience reception, “Le solide fondement de cette opinion est bien la vertu & le merite . . .” [“The solid foundation of this opinion is indeed virtue and merit . . .”] (Faret 74). But Faret is untroubled by such problems as the tensions between appearance and essence inherent in the idea of nobility. His how-to tract abounds in unreflective self-contradiction, moral confusion, and awkward or absent reasoning. At one point, for example, he claims that religion is essential to the courtly behavior of the “Honeste homme,” since “Sans ce principe il n’y a point de probité, et sans probité personne ne sçauroit estre agreeable, non pas mesme aux meschans.” [“Without this principle there is no probity, and without probity nobody can be agreeable, even to bad people.”] (Faret 54–55) The leap from “probité” to being “agreeable” is difficult to follow, to say the least, and why one would want to be “agreeable . . . mesme aux meschans” is left unexplained. As is true for Refuge, probably one of Faret’s sources, the gap between the performative imperatives of courtly identity and a kind of pious bourgeois morality remains unbridged, and it will be left for more complex texts to grapple with these problems.

It is therefore hardly fair to subject this courtesy literature to intensive scrutiny, since it reveals to us so plainly, and without much critical persuasion, the main feature of the discourse of nobility in this period: the dominance of the master tropes of theatre and theatricality, as a means of giving metaphorical presence to the tensions and contradictions inherent in the idea of noble identity. We do not need to perform for these works a kind of therapeutic textual psychoanalysis, exorcising the demons of theatrical (self-)deception to cure the neurosis of the text and the society it seeks to represent, or at least to allow the one and the other to live in a “healthy” fashion with that neurosis. Nor is it necessary to undertake a

facile deconstruction of texts so transparently blind to themselves that they hardly require any sophisticated theoretico-interpretive intervention in order to be shown for what they are; the texts almost pathetically confess their rhetorical collapse before the reader's eyes. What is important to recognize is that this post-Castiglione literature of noble courtesy and courtly behavior, whatever its limitations, nevertheless sets forth the conditions of possibility for the more sophisticated inquiry of, say, Montaigne. The matrix of terms and gestures these manuals provide, dominated by metaphors of theatricality, constitutes the broad substrate for the more complex literature to which we now turn, literature which is only the tip of the vast iceberg that is the literary discourse of nobility in the late Renaissance and the seventeenth century.