



**TOWARDS AN ENLIGHTENED  
DISILLUSIONMENT: RENAISSANCE  
MORALISTIC TREATISES AND THE  
ADULTERATION OF SPANISH  
NOBLE VALUES**

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Eighteenth century Spain was characterized by complex political and cultural identity tensions. The Hapsburg king Charles II lived his life suffering from grave physical and mental disabilities. His failure to provide a direct heir to the throne plunged the country into a dynastic crisis, and after years of violent struggles, the country was forced to accept its first Bourbon king, Philip V, grandson of Louis XIV of France. Decades of cultural warfare ensued as the *afrancesados* and *castizos* drove Spanish Enlightenment towards issues that blended politics with the *ilustrados*' quest for knowledge and the character of Spain. There has been abundant research in recent years (García Cárcel, Alabrús Iglesias, Meyer, Pietschmann and Storrs, to name a few) that points to these sociopolitical issues as the reasons why many eighteenth-century writers expressed a negative view of Spain's position in Europe —the well-known *atraso español*. After all, there was “sufficient reason to believe that Spanish intellectual, social, and economic advances did not quite measure up to those of neighboring European countries [...] there was a feeling even by the very early 1800s that Spain had been left behind by the rest of Europe and that it would take decades to catch up” (Feros 156). These approaches, however, have overlooked the historical transformation of the values that constitute nobility itself as a social group, as well as its influence on the enlightened Spanish authors' critical stances regarding the national elite as a reflection of a degraded society. In this study, I identify a gradual adulteration of morality as a marker of noble social status. By connecting seventeenth-century discourses regarding the necessity of morally reforming the nobility with social practices about its constitution and functioning as a group, I trace how moral superiority ceases to be an intrinsic feature of the privileged class by the eighteenth century. This framework contextualizes the profound effect that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century changes to what it meant to be noble had towards the beginning of the Enlightenment and specifically frames their impact on the *ilustrados*' particularly disillusioned vision of the Spanish elite.

### The Enlightened Perspective on Spanish Nobility

In the early eighteenth century, writers of treatises on courtesy saw their noble audience vastly expanded. Social mobility had taken on a renewed prominence as a consequence of “un proceso de 'metamorfosis', por el cual la antigua nobleza se habría sumado –de forma pasiva– al cambio político y social convirtiéndose en un grupo que supo aprovechar la situación para consolidarse como la clase dominante al tiempo que afianzaba sus lazos con la burguesía emergente en el contexto de una situación económica difícil” (Yun Casalilla 41-42). This adaptation sharply incremented opportunities for workers, merchants, artists, and writers to improve their social standing (see Bolufer Peruga 137-148). The courtesy literature of the beginning of the century focused on delineating the “principios que deben regir – si bien de forma diferenciada – la conducta de todos (nobleza y plebe, mujeres y hombres...)” (Bolufer Peruga 141). Among these texts was Valerio Borja y Loaiso’s *La verdadera política de los hombres de distinción* (1727), where he warned readers that Spain was entering the Enlightenment with a flawed population among which “el vicio es tan común, y la virtud tan rara, que el hombre más sociable se ve obligado a comunicarse con pocos” (175-176). What were perceived as unacceptable improprieties ignited in ecclesiastical authors of the eighteenth century a moralistic drive that built upon historical traditions.<sup>1</sup> These corruption-cleansing texts focused on appropriate behaviors when dealing with other nobles, but also on one’s inner goodness when in solitude: away from the prying eyes of society, yet always visible to the eyes of God. By the mid-eighteenth century, courtesy literature had achieved absolute dominance “no solo en un entorno cortesano y aristocrático, sino en contextos más amplios, a través de la amplia difusión y demanda que tuvo esta literatura en el marco de los procesos de movilidad social” (Bolufer Peruga 236). Despite their opposition to a courtly nobility they saw as viciously immoral, religious writers were unable to stop its expansion throughout Spain. Their failure impacted much of the tone of enlightened literary discourses, and the *ilustrados* often attempted to pierce the sheen of courtesy to reveal its shortcomings, as a necessary step in their pursuit of cultural progress, if not moral redemption.

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<sup>1</sup> Moralistic sources included, among others, the jesuit Fausto Agustín de Buendía, Raimundo Sala, and Felipe Scio de San Miguel. Sala, for instance, instructed his readers to not just read his book “una vez de paso: léala frecuentemente, sin perderla de vista, y procure ponerla en práctica [...] hasta conseguir por un largo ejercicio, el hábito de una perfecta Cortesanía” (Prologue). It was because “parece que no se juzga hoy del mérito de la gente, sino por sus modales” (7) that he insisted readers make honest efforts for improvement, not to just falsely seem courteous.

This disillusionment with nobility was notable already in the works of the first canonical writers of the Spanish Enlightenment. Benito Jerónimo Feijoo disapproved of the elite's decadence over the eight tomes of his collection *Teatro crítico universal*, published between 1726 and 1739. In his essay on *Verdadera y falsa urbanidad* (1736) from the seventh tome, he bemoaned that “así como todos pueden tener el ejercicio de la virtud, pueden también trampearle con la hipocresía [...] sin que el corazón tenga parte alguna en estas demostraciones” (236). His criticism points to his belief that the ruling class had lost its essence: noblemen had the ability to be virtuous if they so wished, but many simply opted for immoral falseness. Feijoo believed that a truly honorable nobleman who possessed “una alma de buena casta no ha menester fingir para observar todas las atenciones de que se compone la cortesanía, porque naturalmente es inclinada a ellas” (237). In his eyes, this honorable nature was no longer characteristic of most eighteenth-century noblemen. Instead of an admirable and illustrious nobility, he saw a group that had become difficult to define because of the increasing number of its members who had inherited their titles through no merit of their own. Feijoo criticized their lack of virtues with scathing condemnation: “¿Por el nacimiento? Hay muchos, muchísimos, muy nobles [...] ineptos para todo, sino para comer; ignorantes, torpes, rudos, y aun de nada calificado nacimiento” (275). His text depicts a marked degree of decline that suggests that moral virtue, which the *ilustrados* considered “un privilegio reservado a la nobleza” (Bolufer Peruga 93), was no longer an intrinsic quality of the vast majority who had secured access to the ruling class not by earning it, but by inheriting their privilege as if through *mayorazgo*.

Feijoo sought to understand the world he lived in by way of cultural analysis and reason to advance human achievements, and he reached bleak conclusions about the moral state of the national elite. As the century progressed, other renowned Spanish authors arrived at similar judgments. Fausto Agustín de Buendía did so with his *Instrucción de christiana y política cortesanía con Dios y con hombres* (1740) where he urged his noble readers “que abundéis más en lo bueno” because “de la abundancia de la virtud interior salen afuera las demostraciones en el trato pacífico, civil y cortés” (4). He had become convinced that nobility had lost its identity and defining virtue, which drove him to base his text on a didactic approach that explained “Qué es cortesía, su necesidad, y utilidad” (1), concepts which had been widely established throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. José Cadalso also voiced his disapproval of immoral noblemen. In his *Los eruditos a la violeta* (1772) he especially judged those who misleadingly projected a knowledge that they did not possess. He lamented that his country had been overtaken by the scourge of what he called *pseudoeruditos*: those who overhauled the value of noble virtue in misguided, dishonorable ways. When it came to the pleasures derived from erudition, Cadalso mocked

popular preferences that had little to do with the forthright proficiency expected by courtesy treatise writers:

Las ciencias no han de servir más que para lucir en los estrados, paseos, luneta de las comedias, tertulias, antesalas de poderosos, y cafés, y para ensoberbecernos, llenarnos de orgullo, hacernos intratables, e infundirnos un sumo desprecio para con todos los que no nos admiren. Este es su objeto, su naturaleza, su principio y su fin. (*Violeta*, Lunes)

Cadalso was disenchanted not by sciences themselves, but by the improper use of them, as reflected in his opinion that many noblemen of the eighteenth century did not seek possession of wisdom, rather the appearance of having it. These men talked, walked, and drank in public events where their ignorance and lack of virtues was concealed under a sheen of vane, empty superiority. Their status was entirely based on dishonorable and immoral subterfuge. As condemnation, Cadalso ironically advised these false intellectuals to “desechad todo género de moderación con los iguales, toda clase de respeto a los mayores, y toda especie de compasión a los inferiores; y conseguiréis justamente el nombre de sabios, por esto solo; adquiriéndooos tanto más renombre” (*Violeta*, Martes). His indictment of the elite’s moral bankruptcy points to a nostalgia that envisions Spain’s past nobility as one that was superior. He further contextualized this discontent in *Cartas marruecas* (1789), a foundational epistolary fiction where the disheartened Moroccan protagonist Gazel insisted to the Spaniard Nuño that “la decadencia de tu patria en este siglo es capaz de demostración con todo el rigor geométrico [...] en el siglo antepasado tu nación era la más docta de Europa [...] pero hoy, del otro lado de los Pirineos, apenas se conocen los sabios que así se llaman por acá” (165). Throughout the text, the term *gracia* (4 instances) that was considered an innate virtue of the elite appeared mostly in the form of *desgracia* (14 instances), further emphasizing Cadalso’s overarching view regarding the moral shortcomings of the nobility. Other comments by Gazel’s exasperated friend Ben-Beley highlight the book’s desolate depiction of the privileged class, disappointed as he was by the “delirio, vicio y flaqueza como abunda entre los hombres, sin que apenas pueda el sabio distinguir cuál es vicio y cuál es virtud” (210). Like Feijoo, he was alarmed by the practice of *nobleza hereditaria*, which he judged as a deplorable “vanidad que yo fundo en que, ochocientos años antes de mi nacimiento, muriese uno que se llamó como yo me llamo, y fue hombre de provecho, aunque yo sea inútil para todo” (197). Seeing these statements, it is no wonder that “Cadalso considerara las *Cartas* como obra predominantemente didáctica, como cumplimiento de un deber patriótico” (Hughes 194) where he could identify the flaws of his coeval noblemen and search for a better Spanish identity to reeducate and redefine the elite.

Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos still expressed discomfort at the state of Spanish nobility during the final years of the eighteenth century. In his *Memoria sobre las diversiones públicas* (1790) he yearned for “aquella varonil y bizarra galantería de nuestros antiguos caballeros, de que apenas ha quedado una débil sombra, y que combinada con las ideas de un siglo más culto e ilustrado, fuera más conforme al espíritu y a los deberes de la nobleza” (200-201). His judgment is validated by Carlos Gutiérrez de los Ríos, sixth count of Fernán Núñez, who in a letter to his children in 1791 vividly complained about the omnipresence of inadequate, immoral courtiers “esclavos de su vanidad, ideas e intrigas” (77). Those slaves to a nobility devoid of virtue were so pervasive, in fact, that Jovellanos proposed the promotion of educational institutions to his peers, where they could teach a “síntesis entre la antigua caballería y los nuevos valores propios de la nobleza útil” (Bolufer Peruga 104). His advice demarcated the majority of dishonorable uneducated noblemen from a minority of virtuous individuals. Jovellanos left no room for doubt regarding his reasoning that the eighteenth-century Spanish elite had lost the desirable qualities that symbolized its moral superiority in centuries past.

This notion of a Spanish nobility congealed into a predominantly immoral or uncivilized state spread across neighboring European countries, making the presumption of a lack of refined sociability or illustrious civilization common mentions in travel literature written by English and French visitors. Spanish scholars found themselves in the difficult position of having to defend their nation in the eyes of neighboring countries, on top of their burden to repair the collapsing values of their elite. At the same time, they struggled to define new ideals that truly conveyed the meaning of Spanish identity in the *Siglo de las Luces*. For some of them, this goal seemed unreachable and thus they opted to express only what they could: a damning evaluation on the state of the country. For instance, in 1782 José Nicolás de Azara found himself repelled by the denigratory view that was being divulged throughout the continent about Spain as a “país parecido al infierno, donde reina la estupidez; que ningún español tiene ni ha tenido crianza, sino los que han logrado la dicha de desasnarse con la politesse de los ingleses o franceses” (Azara). While he lamented this European perception as an exaggeration of the deficiencies in his country’s nobility, he acknowledged that Spaniards brought international criticism on themselves by progressively abandoning their formerly exceptional moral practices. His disillusionment, along with that of his enlightened peers, points to a generalized longing among the *ilustrados* for a noble precursor that was deemed superior, more authentic, and less adulterated by vice.

### **The Origins of the Morally Superior Nobility**

Enlightened writers’ nostalgia for a past nobility they considered remarkable was grounded in the cultural refinements it experienced from the middle ages to the Renaissance. Long before early modern societal

values took over the nation, medieval noblemen primarily assumed the role of warriors to demonstrate their superiority through physical combat. This trait originated in the classical period, where Socrates prioritized rational behaviors in individuals of higher status due to their greater capacity to achieve absolute truth, unlike spiritual or appetitive comportments more akin to the lower classes. His disciple Plato expanded these criteria to include a balance between extremes as a necessary trait for a morally honorable life, which led him to assert that soldiers were the most predisposed to social-spiritual virtue (see Brown). This classical order was used for centuries as doxa, universal historical precedents that reinforced preconceived notions about the superiority of nobles. They perpetuated the elite's access to power as an unquestionable truth that would be disseminated by courtesy literature throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Medieval monasticism added an ever-growing Christian tone to the physical potency expected of the noble warrior. This was depicted in well-known works such as Fray Martín de Córdoba's "Compendio de la fortuna" (1453), where he rendered the idea of a moral nobleman by glorifying religious asceticism: "el verdadero varón es el hombre austeramente fuerte y resistente, capaz de contenerse ante el mundo material y sensible" (56). As José Fernando Martín explains, "a la virilidad castrense de la resistencia al dolor, al cansancio, al hambre y a otras supuestas debilidades del cuerpo, el monasticismo añade la resistencia a las tentaciones de la carne; a la hombría de la fuerza física le suma la fuerza racional del hombre reflexivo y disciplinado; y al valor frente a enemigos de carne y hueso, el arrojo de enfrentarse al diablo" (83). The preferred nobleman, now a Christian warrior, had become a model of not just physical superiority, but moral strength as well. Other popular works that followed during the early modernity, such as Juan Luis Vives's *Instrucción de la mujer Christiana* (1528) and Fray Luis de León's *La perfecta casada* (1584) further developed the notion of spiritual morality as a necessary trait among nobles, regardless of gender.

As Spain's population progressively reorganized in urban centers and the protective walls of early cities promoted a safer existence, enemy threats became easier to fend off. Societal attention shifted from bodily potency as a marker of high status toward an unprecedented emphasis on self-awareness: displaying constant self-control became necessary for urban

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<sup>2</sup> The French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu calls doxa the generally accepted ideological elements that are validated as a universal reality within a given society. He argues that culture reproduces social structures where legitimate power relations "are embedded in the systems of classification used to describe and discuss everyday life" (*Field 2*). These systems are concealed by universally accepted behaviors through which "the natural and social world appears as self-evident. This experience we shall call doxa" (*Outline 164*).

interactions among noble city dwellers of the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In this newly civilized renaissance society, Baldassare Castiglione's *Il libro del Cortegiano* (1528) updated the parameters of noble identity. His work depicted a courtly nobleman formed by numerous traits that encompassed a "círculo virtuoso cuyo garante es, en el estatus y el género, la nobleza de nacimiento de hombres virtuosos" (Rico Ferrer 44-45). It was heavily expanded throughout Spain by way of Juan Boscán's translation, *El cortesano* (1534).<sup>4</sup> The book reproduced elements of the classical perspective on the superiority of the elite, visible in comments such as Otaviano's "Né pensó che Aristotile e Platone si fossero sdegnati del nome di perfetto cortegiano, perché si vede chiaramente che fecero l'opere della cortegiania" (359) ["nor do I think that Aristotle and Plato would have scorned the name of perfect Courtier, for we clearly see that they performed the works of Courtiership" (281)]. Among the many qualities he stipulated, Castiglione's primary requisite was that "questo nostro cortegiano sia nato nobile e di generosa famiglia, perché molto men si disdice ad un ignobile mancar di far operazioni virtuose, che ad uno nobile [...] perché la nobiltà è quasi una chiara lampa, che manifesta e fa veder l'opere bone e le male [...] non scoprendo questo splendor di nobiltà l'opere degli ignobili, essi mancano dello stimulo e del timore di quella infamia" (28) ["this Courtier of ours should be nobly born and of gentle race; because it is far less unseemly for one of ignoble birth to fail in worthy deeds [...] for noble birth is like a bright lamp that manifests and makes visible good and evil deeds [...] since this splendour of nobility does not illumine the deeds of the humbly born, they lack that stimulus and fear of shame" (21-22)].<sup>5</sup> Throughout the four volumes of his collection, Castiglione emphasized the necessity for his ideal courtier to embrace moral behavior. In the first volume, he expressed that "io estimo quel solo esser vero filosofo morale, che vol esser bono, ed a ciò gli bisognano pochi altri precetti, che tal volontà" (69) ["I esteem him alone

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Civilizing Process* (1939), Norbert Elias traces how "for centuries roughly the same rules, elementary by our standards, were repeated, obviously without producing firmly established habits. This now changes." (79). Similarly, Steven Pinker corroborates that developing behavioral standards "inculcated an ethic of self-control that made continence and propriety second nature" (592).

<sup>4</sup> For an exhaustive analysis of the impact of Castiglione's book, see Burke.

<sup>5</sup> Castiglione's cousin Ludovico da Canossa and Gaspar Pallavicino debate making noble birth a requirement, but the dialogue ultimately concludes with the consensus that "avendo noi a formare un cortegiano senza difetto alcuno e cumolato d'ogni laude, mi par necessario farlo nobile, sí per molte altre cause, come ancor per la opinión universale, la qual subito accompagna la nobiltà" (31) ["since we have to form a Courtier without flaw and endowed with every praiseworthy quality, it seems to me necessary to make him nobly born" (24)].

to be a true moral philosopher, who wishes to be good, and in this regard he needs few other precepts than that wish" (55)]. In the fourth volume, he further justified this requirement arguing that "la virtù intellettuale si fa perfetta con la dottrina, così la morale si fa con la consuetudine" (339) ["just as intellectual worth is perfected by instruction, so is moral worth perfected by practice" (265)]. His interest in nobility's moral superiority, however, was in tension with his other main advice for courtiers: perfecting the skill of *sprezzatura*.

Castiglione wanted every courtier to display natural grace "che lo faccia al primo aspetto a chiunque lo vede grato ed amabile" (29) ["that shall make him at first sight pleasing and agreeable to all who see him" (23)], convinced that the harmony inherent to nobility facilitated one's integration into the higher class. He acknowledged, however, that not all nobles were naturally gracious, so he established what he called *sprezzatura* as a fundamental skill to provoke admiration in others by concealing one's efforts required for any activity: "usar in ogni cosa una certa sprezzatura, che nasconda l'arte e dimostri ciò che si fa e dice venir fatto senza fatica e quasi senza pensarvi. Da questo credo io che derivi assai la grazia; perch'è delle cose rare e ben fatte ognun sa la difficoltà, onde in esse la facilità genera grandissima meraviglia" (44) ["practise in everything a certain nonchalance that shall conceal design and show that what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thought. From this I believe grace is in large measure derived, because everyone knows the difficulty of those things that are rare and well done, and therefore facility in them excites the highest admiration" (35)]. *Sprezzatura*, a concession to placate Ludovico Pio's complaint that it would be impossible to fit all the perfection Castiglione sought in one human being, captured the courtier's hunger for spectacle in lieu of substance. Despite the courtly ideal's promotion of moral virtue among noblemen, *sprezzatura* generated a loophole: it allowed nobles to execute any action with feigned spontaneity, which endowed them with a semblance of innate facility that cemented their distinguished status, albeit through a falseness that Feijoo would fundamentally repudiate two centuries later. A gentleman with no natural grace despite noble birth could still partake in the privileges of nobility under Castiglione's guidelines, provided he obscured his shortcomings through an expert use of *sprezzatura*. This compromise between moral superiority and immoral opportunism for the sake of impressing others would have great consequences in the coming decades, as "dissimulation enabled those who were adept in this art to operate under cover" (Snyder 29). In time, this compromise would enable future reconsiderations regarding who had the right to or could adopt the markers necessary to become a part of nobility.

### **The Rise of Immoral Imitators**

As the archetype of the courtly nobleman dominated Renaissance Spain and much of Europe, the expectation of superior morality as a marker of

nobility progressively waned. By mid-sixteenth century, Giovanni Della Casa reformulated Castiglione's precepts in *Il Galateo* (1558), a more pragmatic approach that extolled practical behaviors appropriate for day-to-day social interactions among nobles. While Della Casa also maintained that a nobleman ought to execute honorable actions to remain on a moral and righteous path, he downplayed being highborn in favor of amiable conduct as a crucial requirement to unlock access to the elite: "niuno può dubitare, che a chiunque si dispone di vivere non per le solitudini, o ne' romitorii, ma nelle città e tra gli uomini, non sia utilissima cosa il sapere essere ne' suoi costumi e nelle sue maniere grazioso e piacevole" (48) ["no one will deny that knowing how to be gracious and pleasant in one's habits and manners is a very useful thing to whomever decides to live in cities and among men, rather than in desert wastes or hermit's cells" (4)]. Despite his emphatic admonishment of excessive ceremonies because they made one seem false, which he considered a sign of immoral dishonesty, it is inescapable that Della Casa's insistence on employing agreeability for personal gain, while effective to attain privileged status among the nobility, represents a moral gray area. His proposed adaptable versatility, both in pleasantries and other facets of courtly life such as eating at a table with guests, was not endorsed because it was inherently good, but because "sconce maniere si vogliono fuggire, come noiose all'udire ed al vedere" (51) ["vulgar manners are to be avoided because they are bothersome to the ear and to the eye" (6)]. Averting vice to keep appearances in the eyes of others, not to be wholesome, was a fundamental consensus between Castiglione and Della Casa. Both writers maintained a heightened focus on the elite's necessity to look superior, instead of being morally superior.

If Castiglione's acceptance of concealing one's lack of virtue represented a glimpse of the future redefinitions of nobility, *Il Galateo* emboldened any reader, noble or not, to learn the most effective strategies that would allow them to infiltrate higher social strata. Della Casa wrote his manual as a guide for his nephew, "acciò che, tu, ammaestrato da me, possi tenere la diritta via con salute dell'anima tua e con laude e onore della tua orrevole e nobile famiglia" (46) "so that, if you follow my advice, you may stay on the right path towards the salvation of your soul as well as for the praise and honour of your distinguished and noble family" (3). However, in teaching him how to manufacture a congenial presence as a way to enter and remain within the ruling class, foregoing an emphasis on moral qualities, Della Casa gave readers of all walks of life a blueprint to filter into the elite: by providing them the knowledge to identify and rectify their lacking social etiquette. Ascension in the social hierarchy by imitation, while undeniably challenging, was rendered an attainable target for those without moral virtues or noble birth, as long as they refined their appearance into an affability not unlike Castiglione's graceful looking *sprezzatura*.

*Il Galateo* was adapted specifically for Spanish readers of the late sixteenth century in Lucas Gracián Dantisco's *Galateo español* (1582). He

preserved the main ideas from the source “traduciéndolas del Galateo Italiano, y añadiendo al propósito otros cuentos y cosas que yo he visto y oído” (Gracián Dantisco 3). It achieved great popularity thanks to numerous editions that consolidated it as a “fundamento de toda obra del Siglo de Oro español que trate sobre la forma de vivir” (Martínez Millán 91). Unlike previous courtesy treatises that assumed a noble readership, *Galateo español* expanded Della Casa’s pragmatic vision of courtly nobility to the lower classes by proclaiming that with its guidance “hoy al ignorante hazes prudente / al más grosero tornas cortesano / pones en perfección al que no sabe” (103). Gracián Dantisco’s remarks about *ignorantes*, *groseros* and imperfect, uneducated readers signaled an audience that did not comply with the moral superiority expected of the privileged class. He further pointed to the necessity to correct his readers’ deficiencies by clarifying “¿Quién corrige defectos sin enfado? / Quién da gusto y placer con dulces cuentos / Gracián y *Galateo*” (102). The overarching goal of his book was “la institución y buena criança de los mancebos” (98), and the fact that he referred to this process as the *criança* of soon-to-be courtiers, *caballeros*, and *gentilhombres* further illustrates that he was not addressing those already in court, but those who wished to enter it.<sup>6</sup>

Gracián Dantisco’s interpretation of *buena criança*, however, clashes with the inner moral goodness sought by moralistic treatises. In fact, the text only included one cursory reference concerning morality; a recommendation to read “novelas y cuentos [...] saquen dellas buenos exemplos y moralidades, como hacían los antiguos fabuladores” (155). Even so, his advice was driven by the “entretenimiento y gusto” (155) these stories provide, not by any moral improvement stipulated as a requisite to enter de ranks of the privileged class. The main objective of *Galateo español* was successfully increasing one’s social status, and the tool that bestowed access to the elite was for Gracián Dantisco a refined command of nobility’s gracious appearance. In contrast to previous courtesy texts focused on virtue, morality, or even Castiglione’s imitation of grace through *sprezzatura*, “Gracián Dantisco adapta el tratado de Giovanni Della Casa, dando mayor importancia a sostener una conversación agradable como llave para el éxito social” (Rico Ferrer 35). Eschewing intangible precepts such as a superior moral values, he analyzed the courtly practices that guaranteed ascension to the elite, and he specified how to imitate them perfectly; thereby teaching his lower-class readership how to become noble through appearance, not substance. For Spaniards of the late sixteenth

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<sup>6</sup> Juan Benito Guardiola corroborated that this assortment of terms was “muy usado en Italia, Francia, Cataluña, y en otras partes, y aún también casi lo es ya en Castilla llamar gentilhombre a un caballero” (68). They were all marks of nobility, because “llamamos caballeros a los nobles y principales hijosdalgo que tienen un estado y lugar eminente” (81).

century, social mobility already represented a potential –if extremely difficult– consideration for one’s future, and Gracián Dantisco’s work was a forthright recognition that Castiglione’s supplemental *sprezzatura* had become a fundamental tool for anyone to infiltrate nobility by projecting a virtuous façade. This approach for climbing the social ladder with little regard to moral considerations generated an unprecedented mindset change that permeated intellectual discourses in seventeenth-century Spain, progressively adulterating the significance of noble values.

### **A legal pursuit of cleansing noble values**

Seeing the hierarchical disarray that Gracián Dantisco’s text was causing in this newly malleable elite, Juan Benito Guardiola wrote *Tratado de la nobleza* (1591) as an attempt to regulate access to this social group through methods sanctioned by the church and government, such as “la jerarquización de la sociedad atendiendo a la funcionalidad de sus miembros” (Guillén Berrendero 128). As a Benedictine friar mostly interested in religion and government, Guardiola compiled information on the origin, norms for endowment, and categories of nobility. Instead of referring to the highborn as *cortesanos* like his predecessors, Guardiola exhaustively specified the minute differences between *caballeros*, *hidalgos*, *gentilbombres*, *infanzones*, *duques* and *marqueses* as well as their various requisites so that the uneducated masses could not easily insert themselves in those groups and generate an ambiguous and undefined social class. His treatise, aimed at restraining the deep changes that Gracián Dantisco’s influence brought to Spanish nobility, reclaimed “el valor de la sangre noble como vehículo transmisor de una serie de cualidades morales y políticas” that had previously been *conditio sine qua non* to enable the “capacidad individual del noble para realizar actos honrosos” (Guillén Berrendero 139). The sanguine exclusivity that Guardiola attached to nobility’s superior morality sought to make it impossible for anyone to fake their way into this privileged social group. Instead, he codified two potential avenues for lower class individuals to acquire noble status not through appearances, but by legitimately proving their moral worth.

The first method was based on letters. It manifested Guardiola’s appreciation for knowledge and education among noblemen, as he declared that “toda ciencia en grande manera ilustra, pues que no solamente ennoblece interiormente, mas aún exteriormente. Ennoblece al entendimiento que lo alumbra y haze claro, y el alumbrado gobierna el cuerpo y lo rige con buenas y virtuosas costumbres” (23). His conviction stemmed from the fact that doctoral graduation marked the moment a man attained the title and reputation of a nobleman, echoing Gracián Dantisco’s persuasive defense of education on the grounds that “[la] razón tiene poder, como señora y maestra, de mudar los malos usos” (Gracián Dantisco 100). Both authors’ perspectives on how to use that knowledge properly, however, differed greatly. Guardiola’s educational requirement may have

been far-fetched –though not strictly unattainable– for Spain’s population comprised in large part of illiterate farmers, but his proposal confirms that traders, landlords, and other professionals still had the possibility to legally access the elite, albeit in a more virtuous way than Gracián Dantisco had intended.<sup>7</sup>

The second and most frequent method was based on weapons and *insignias*, trophies with which “el príncipe concede la nobleza dando a aquel tal insignias y armas particulares... de aquí vino que los que avian hecho algunas hazañas y obras famosas en las peleas tomasen por armas el fin y remate de su buen y feliz y próspero successo, como blasón y memoria para todos sus descendientes, que con semejantes hechos quedasen honrados y ennoblecidos” (Guardiola 31). Guardiola’s specifications of valid legal procedures to acquire noble status were based on ethical, illustrious behavior. They set him apart from other popular Renaissance treatises’ emphasis on teaching how to fake the grace innate to the highborn instead of encouraging proper virtue through honorable comportment. His codes for validating one’s privileged status would, however, lose favor in the coming century, as the idea of *nobleza hereditaria* they extolled as a benefit enjoyed by one’s *descendientes* became entrenched in cultural expectations. This trend, as mentioned earlier, represented a primary complaint by *ilustrados* such as Feijoo, Cadalso and Jovellanos’, exasperated by individuals from the eighteenth century who claimed access to the ruling class despite never having engaged in any honorable action whatsoever.

Guardiola’s faith in the integrity of these arrangements implied that nobility should be restricted specifically to the most exceptional individuals. His well-known treatise ratified “la virtud y la identificación de la nobleza con ella, mediante un alegato de carácter moral” that stipulated moral superiority as an essential “componente simbólico de la condición de noble” (Guillén Berrendero 136). His unflinching insistence suggests that by the turn of the century, courtly status had become so porous that he felt it was imperative to restore nobility’s morally selective origins by specifying legitimate processes to legally validate one’s ascension to power. Doing so would reinstate the prevalence of honor and moral virtues that were becoming rare among noblemen, as they increasingly accessed the elite through opportunistic outward aspects that adulterated the group’s identity. Controlling who entered the higher echelons of society represented a primary necessity for this friar how insisted that “la virtud es la esencia de la honra, y... sin virtud no puede haber honra” (Guardiola 1). His undertaking

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<sup>7</sup> Antonio Viñao attributes the national lack of education to the church’s preference for oral instruction: “prohibirse la lectura de la Biblia en lengua vulgar desde el siglo XVI hasta finales del XVIII [...] constituyó, comparativamente, un freno a la alfabetización” (11).

to promote a return to the stringent moral requirements of years past, however, eventually failed.

### Sanctioning the Adulterated Renaissance Nobility

The social requisites stipulated throughout the seventeenth century were prescribed by “la fría racionalidad, el cálculo despiadado, la hipocresía y el disimulo” (Bolufer Peruga 75). Disheartened by the concealment of what she perceived as moral degeneracy spreading among nobles, the countess Luisa de Padilla, daughter of the Captain Martín Padilla y Manrique, published *Nobleza virtuosa* (1637). She sought to purge noblemen’s declining virtues in Spain, which until then had been an “imperio donde no se ponía el sol” but had begun to show worrying “síntomas de agotamiento” (Domínguez Ortiz 127) as a consequence of the expanding corruption. Padilla employed religion as a source of guiding values, namely Christian chastity and morality, which supported her conviction that “consiste la nobleza mayor en más virtud, y nace della la nobleza, conservase en ella, queda cadáver si le falta” (Padilla 4). Padilla’s book resembled Guardiola’s predecessors in that it provided advice for the daily life of the elite, but her mentions to charming adaptability, while reminiscent of sixteenth-century treatises, focused on the integrity of one’s interactions with others, not on the appearance.

Although Padilla’s logic was driven by the preservation of personal integrity, she was careful to not downplay the necessity to preserve social standing and authority. In a nod to the importance of appearances established by earlier treatises, she exhorted her readers to “mostrad cortesía, y urbanidad con desahogo compuesto, y quedad aquí advertido para todos los tiempos... que no os particularizeys con ninguna, ni digays palabra (por disimulada que sea) indecente” (44). Likewise, she recommended that they “buscad amigos de autoridad [...] os estará esto bien, siendo cierto, que por las compañías se da uno a conocer” (55). Unlike earlier treatises, however, Padilla never justified the blind pursuit of preservation or increase of power. The deceitful *sprezzatura* or the false pleasantries endorsed by Padilla’s precursors clashed with her view of nobility as a purveyor of Christian honesty. She advocated for a morally wholesome conduct and suggested that “si os quisiere por íntimo a vos alguno, guardad fielmente con él las leyes de amistad” (52). Her attention was fixated on the richness of the soul as a necessary trait for any noble, earned through truly honorable friendships rather than egotistical social climbing. Padilla was just as aware of the importance of one’s position in the social hierarchy as her predecessors, but she was not willing to sacrifice her Christian values to preserve it.

This perceived decrease in honorable attitudes among the privileged class had already been noted by Gracián Dantisco, which had driven him to conclude that “son amados los que saben solazar y decir bien sin agraviar a nadie; y son muy pocos los que esto saben hacer, porque han de estar

advertidos de muchas cosas para con caer en desgracia” (69). Half a century later, Padilla identified a more profound emaciation of honorable noble values in laments that bewailed “empresca casi imposible es, buscar un amigo verdadero, quando en el mundo está tan recibido, dar este nombre al más falso amigo, y cierto enemigo” (51). Faced with a Spanish nobility she considered morally bankrupt, the Countess cautioned her readers against trusting servants of inferior classes, whose increasing boldness represented a threat to the elite’s expected moral underpinnings. She assumed their intentions to be suspect because of the decades-long trail of courtesy literature that fostered their ambition to improve their social positions through dishonest trickery. Padilla feared that continuing to allow the integration of people with such unscrupulous zeal for power into the privileged class would further adulterate its already fading identity:

ay entre ellos muchos desagradecimientos, mala fe, y correspondencias, si se les hazen favores, y toleran sus faltas, se desvanecen, y intentan gobernar, y tiranizar, la voluntad de sus dueños, si los tratan con severidad y corrigen, los tienen por insufribles; a las mercedes y liberalidades corresponden con ingratitud; y si en esto anda el Señor medido (aunque sea por no hallar en ellos méritos) siempre está murmurando, y mal servido. (149)

For Padilla, most servants did not possess the virtuous *méritos* necessary to be granted access to the elite. She depicted an honorable path not dissimilar to the methods codified by Guardiola. For decades, ignoble readers had learned from Castiglione, Della Casa and Gracián Dantisco’s popular works to conceal their shortcomings, to be falsely polite and do whatever it took to secure their place in power – resulting in nobles *ineptos para todo*, as seen in Feijoo’s aforementioned complaint. The mixing of the exorbitant fervor for authority of these *arribistas* or parvenus with the already entrenched nobility had produced a privileged class where “son más los que dexandose llevar de inclinaciones depravadas, y aduladores (peste de la Nobleza) usan mal de la autoridad [...] tomando por armas contra Dios, las mercedes que del recibieron (Padilla 8). Assimilated without satisfying any of the virtues she considered essential, these individuals’ immoral priorities had encroached on the identifying qualities of the preexisting members of the group, adulterating what it had previously meant to be noble. Distressed by this trend, Padilla found solace in the small minority of servants who were “buenos, y fieles, no es poca suerte hallarlos tales, y disposición en ellos para favorecerlos y honrarlos: así os aconsejo lo hagays” (150). Although her work showcased the enduring influence of the affability stipulated by previous treatises, *Nobleza virtuosa*’s most valuable contribution to the literary discourses of the Renaissance was its diagnosis of an acute attenuation of the moral values that had been fundamental to the privileged class in centuries past. As the number of ignoble nobles that

disregarded honor and virtue reached critical mass, Padilla recorded her condemnatory view of the adverse effect this adulterated nobility was having throughout Spain.

The rising erasure of requirements to be a part of the ruling class toward the end of the seventeenth century exacerbated the perception of adulteration in the following decades and stirred more religious writers to follow Padilla's lead with their own disapproving judgments. They considered it imperative to protest the fateful destiny that, in their view, the newly inclusive nobility heralded for Spain. In an attempt to cleanse the nation of this thriving corruption, "la corona y la iglesia, a través de múltiples y complejos discursos normativos, intentaron regular el comportamiento moral, social y económico de hombres y mujeres, al establecer roles o papeles sociales, parámetros de conducta, códigos morales y jerarquías diferenciadas" (Fiorentini Cañedo 1). On the cusp of the Enlightenment, seventeenth-century society's generalized inaction to protect a noble culture based on virtuous appearances in lieu of actual honorable conduct dominated literary discourses. In *Príncipe perfecto y ministros aiustados, documentos políticos y morales* (1662), Andrés Mendo defended the urgent need to educate the elite for Spain's continuity, because "la felicidad de un reyno depende de la crianza de la juventud" (3). He decried that the diluted nobility of the mid-seventeenth century no longer sought moral or spiritual improvement, blaming it on the fact that the new noblemen surrounded themselves with courtly amenities and pleasures which predisposed them to vice instead of morality. He justified his accusations by alleging that "la demasía en las comidas, el exquisito aparato dellas, el aliño costoso de los trages, los adornos domésticos superfluos, y peregrinos, y otras delicias semejantes afeminan los ánimos, enflaquecen los bríos, y abaten los pensamientos. No se aspira a acciones generosas, quando se emplean los cuidados en ingeniar extraordinarios aliños" (138). The affable courtly practices with which Della Casa had softened Castiglione's more rigid requisites of noble birth had themselves been abandoned in favor of superfluous luxuries that repelled Mendo. He indicted these behaviors for further eroding noble values and fostering a generalized compliance with moral weakness in the face of commodified vices.

Antonio de Ezcaray upheld a similar rejection. In his view as a Franciscan monk, he considered that the Spanish privileged class had plunged into a moral collapse. In his *Vozes del dolor nacidas de la multitud de pecados...* (1691), a text deeply nostalgic for the superiority of the nobility from the previous century, he applauded how Spanish forebears made great efforts to become part of the elite by legitimately earning *insignias* and alerted his readers about the perils of abandoning this practice. He lamented the fragile state of Spain's political standing at the turn of the century, recalling how "en otros tiempos (no ha muchos años) la nación Española, con dejarse ver, se hazía temer, y respetar... confieso que lloro a el ver tantas culpas, y este abuso de la profanidad irremediable, y ha llegado a tan

exorbitante extremo la compostura en los hombres” (22). Similar to Mendo’s disapproval of courtly amenities, Ezcaray blamed clothing opulence as a chief indicator of noblemen’s decadence. Della Casa had previously insisted that “no solo es importante que la vestimenta sea de finos paños, sino también que el hombre se esfuerce en avenirse cuanto pueda a la costumbre de los demás ciudadanos y amoldarse a sus usos” (152). Gracián Dantisco later echoed those recommendations emphasizing that “bien vestido debe andar cada uno, según su estado, y edad, porque de otra manera parece que en quererse señalar desprecia la gente (29). Ezcaray inverted their advice. He harshly criticized “cualquiera, que solo para motivo de la jactancia, y vanidad en los vestidos, vana, y enormemente excede de tal fuerte, que pervierta todo el fin, y orden de su institución, peca mortalmente” (85). Exasperated by the insincerity and superficiality he believed to be rampant across the nation, he revived Padilla’s moral restoration with greater severity as a last effort to cleanse the elite of its dishonest focus on appearances through biblical doctrine. Both *Príncipe perfecto* and *Vozes* represented the more critical side of “dos extremos morales que iban desde los que se aferraban a la ley de forma escrupulosa a los que se distinguían por su forma de vida disoluta o relajada” (Ruiz Ortiz 2). As with Guardiola and Padilla, their cautionary injunctions to nobility eventually failed to secure their intended absolution. The eighteenth century commenced with increasingly adulterated noble values that shaped nobility into a “nebulosa social, de confusos bordes y de difícil estructuración interna” (Soria Mesa 37) after decades in which all sorts of individuals, noble or ignoble, moral or immoral, managed to become part of the elite to improve their living conditions. Spain inaugurated its eighteenth century with a group of noblemen who, as Borja y Loaiso criticized, predominantly lacked the traditional cultural, political and religious virtues to cement their distinct morally superior identity and guide the country into Enlightenment. It had become, as Jovellanos would describe decades later, a shadow of its former self.

### Conclusion

Among authors of the Renaissance, moral superiority through the lens of Christian doctrine represented a defining quality of nobility, but divergent sociocultural trends throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provoked profound changes to its values. By the time the *ilustrados* took hold of Spain’s intellectual discourses, the noble archetype that had previously relied on honest behavior had been adulterated with a mix of higher and lower social strata for which appearance, not morality, defined the privileged class. As Adolfo Carrasco Martínez states, although much of “la gran nobleza siguió encastillada en su concepción exclusivista de la sociedad” (78), its progressive transformation throughout the Renaissance provoked cultural and social tensions between noblemen deemed honorable and the newcomers they considered unscrupulous opportunists. This clash

was embedded in many well-known literary works such as those cited in this study. As Spain moved towards neoclassicism, no amount of *sprezzatura* could conceal the pervasive lack of virtue and honor within the Spanish ruling class that enlightened writers identified and criticized. Castiglione could have probably never foreseen the profound impact his courtly ideal would have for nobility in the two centuries that followed the publication of *Il libro del Cortegiano*. With the deprecation of combat and increasing urbanization of Spain, the privileged class found itself in the unusual position of having to redefine how it exerted and justified its power and status in the social hierarchy. Once concealment of one's insufficiency was established as a valid method to infiltrate the elite, it did not take long for the lower classes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to do so expertly. Those who ascended to the ruling class by pretending to be virtuous enjoyed the same power as those who were raised to embrace noble morality as second nature, bringing to light the erosion of markers of nobility that had been ineluctable requisites for one's ascension to power in preceding generations.

As this study demonstrates, the disillusionment of Spanish authors from the Enlightenment was inextricably linked to Renaissance transformations of core noble tenets. The adulteration of Spanish nobility provoked reactions from both those within the hegemonic group as well as those outside of it, generating “tensiones que en el siglo XVIII [...] heredan la tradicional preocupación –que se remonta al menos al Renacimiento– sobre la relación entre el interior y el exterior, la conducta y la conciencia” (Bolufer 391). The privileged class saw its superior principles adulterated by exchanging an exceptional morality for a refined appearance, an identity crisis that raised a renewed urgency among writers and socialites “to create a hierarchy of loyalties and identities with Spanish identity uppermost as the only shared one” (Feros 170). As sociopolitical divisions invigorated Spaniards' efforts to define a national sense of self, the *ilustrados* ventured into finding a new identity for the enlightened elite, propelled by its nebulous state. The immediately preceding century's authors and the similar concerns they raised are, therefore, fundamental to understand the highly critical eighteenth-century depictions of Spanish nobility.

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Francisco de Goya, *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*), plate 43 of *Los Caprichos*, 1799. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.