

BALDESAR CASTIGLIONE

Platonic Love

The *Book of the Courtier* by Baldesar Castiglione ranks as one of the supreme expressions of the Italian Renaissance. First published in 1528 in the full glory of the High Renaissance, the book encapsulates more than a century of humanistic discussions concerning the ways to perfect human nature. Though formally confined to one particular way of life—the life of courtiers at princely courts—the dialogue in fact is a virtual compendium of themes central to Italian Renaissance thought: themes such as virtue and good manners, spiritual and sensual love, religion, the nature of beauty, true nobility, the correct use of language, the active and contemplative lives, the status of women, the ideal form of the polity, and the respective truths of arms, letters, and the arts. These subjects are laid out in the form of imaginary dialogues among the most distinguished Italian noblemen and noblewomen of the day, gathered together at the famous Renaissance court in the Duchy of Urbino.

The author of the dialogues, Baldesar Castiglione (1478–1529), was a humanist, soldier, and diplomat who spent most of his career in the service of the dukes of Urbino. In 1524 he was appointed papal nuncio to Spain and died in Toledo of the plague in 1529. The *Courtier* is his only important work, but it is one of surpassing literary artistry that represents the Urbino of his youth as a model of Renaissance ideals. In the present selection from Book IV, Castiglione's interlocutor, Pietro Bembo, describes a spiritual love between individuals that is far above mere physical love.

Then signor Gaspare continued: 'I remember that when these gentlemen were discussing the accomplishments of the courtier yesterday evening they wished him to be in love. However, when we sum up what has been said so far we could come to the conclusion that the courtier who must introduce the prince to virtue through his own merits and authority must of necessity be an elderly man, for only rarely does wisdom not wait upon age, and especially as regards what we learn from experience. So I do not see how if he is advanced in years it is fitting for the courtier

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to be in love, seeing that, as has already been said this evening, in old men love is futile and what women take for agreeable courtesies, pleasantries and elegance in the young are in the old inept and ridiculous follies which will cause some women to detest and everyone to deride whoever indulges in them. So if this Aristotle of yours, as an elderly courtier, were to be in love and to do the things that young lovers do (like some we have seen in our own times) I fear he would forget to instruct his prince and doubtless the children would make fun of him behind his back and the ladies would hardly derive any pleasure from him other than to mock him.'

Then signor Ottaviano answered: 'As all the other qualities attributed to the courtier are suitable to him, even when he is old, I don't think it right to deprive him of the happiness of being in love.'

'On the contrary,' retorted signor Gaspare, 'to deprive him of it adds another perfection to him and enables him to live happily, free of all calamity and misery.'

Then Pietro Bembo added: 'Do you not remember, signor Gaspare, that although he is untutored in love in the game he suggested the other evening signor Ottaviano evidently knew that there are some lovers who regard as pleasurable all the storms of indignation, the outbursts of temper, the wars and the torments that they experience with their ladies? And he asked to be taught the cause of this pleasure. Therefore if our courtier were to be inflamed with the kind of love that is agreeable and without bitterness, even if elderly he would not experience any misery or suffering. And then again as a wise man, which we suppose him to be, he would not deceive himself in thinking that everything suitable for a young man to do was likewise suitable in his case. If in love, he would doubtless love in a way that would not only bring him no blame but earn him great praise and complete happiness, free of all vexation, which rarely if ever happens with younger men. And so he would not neglect to instruct his prince nor would he do anything to cause children to make fun of him.'

Then the Duchess remarked: 'I am glad, Pietro, that you have had to make little effort in our discussion this evening, because now we can have all the more confidence in giving you the task of speaking, and of teaching us about this kind of love which is so felicitous that it brings with it neither blame nor displeasure; for doubtless it would be one of the most useful and important of the endowments yet attributed to the courtier. So please, I beg you, tell us all you know about it.'

Pietro smiled and replied: 'Madam, I wouldn't wish my having said

that it is permissible for old men to love to cause these ladies to suppose that I am old myself. So please give this task to someone else.'

The Duchess replied: 'You should not run away from being reputed old in wisdom, even if you are young in years. So please go on, and don't make any more excuses.'

Then Pietro Bembo answered: 'Truly, madam, if I do have to talk on this subject I shall have to go for advice to my Lavinello's friend, the hermit.'

At this, as if annoyed, signora Emilia exclaimed:

'Pietro, no one among us is more disobedient than you. So it would be only right if the Duchess were to punish you.'

Pietro, who was still smiling, answered:

'Don't be annoyed with me, madam, for pity's sake. For I shall tell you what you want.'

'Then please do so,' replied signora Emilia.

Thereupon, Pietro Bembo remained quiet for a little while. Then, having composed himself for a moment as if to speak of important things, he began as follows:

'Gentlemen, to show that old men can love not only blamelessly but sometimes more happily than the young, it will be necessary for me to enter upon a little discourse in order to make it clear what love is and what is the nature of the happiness that lovers experience. So I beg you to listen attentively, because I hope to make you realize that there is no man to whom it is unbecoming to be in love, even though he should be fifteen or twenty years older than signor Morello.'

After there was some laughter at this, Pietro Bembo continued:

'I say, therefore, that as defined by the philosophers of the ancient world Love is simply a certain longing to possess beauty; and since this longing can only be for things that are known already, knowledge must always of necessity precede desire, which by its nature wishes for what is good, but of itself is blind and so cannot perceive what is good. So Nature has ruled that every appetitive faculty, or desire, be accompanied by a cognitive faculty or power of understanding. Now in the human soul there are three faculties by which we understand or perceive things: namely, the senses, rational thought and intellect. Thus the senses desire things through sensual appetite or the kind of appetite which we share with the animals; reason desires things through rational choice, which is, strictly speaking, proper to man; and intellect, which links man to the angels, desires things through pure will. It follows that the sensual appetite desires only those things that are perceptible by the senses, whereas man's will finds its satisfaction in the contemplation of spiritual things that can be

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apprehended by intellect. And then man, who is rational by his very nature and is placed between the two extremes of brute matter and pure spirit, can choose to follow the senses or to aspire to the intellect, and so can direct his appetites or desires now in the one direction, now in the other. In either of these two ways, therefore, he can long for beauty, which is the quality possessed by all natural or artificial things that are composed in the good proportion and due measure that befit their nature.

‘However, I shall speak of the kind of beauty I now have in mind, which is that seen in the human body and especially the face and which prompts the ardent desire we call love; and we shall argue that this beauty is an influx of the divine goodness which, like the light of the sun, is shed over all created things but especially displays itself in all its beauty when it discovers and informs a countenance which is well proportioned and composed of a certain joyous harmony of various colours enhanced by light and shadow and by symmetry and clear definition. This goodness adorns and illumines with wonderful splendour and grace the object in which it shines, like a sunbeam striking a lovely vase of polished gold set with precious gems. And thus it attracts to itself the gaze of others, and entering through their eyes it impresses itself upon the human soul, which it stirs and delights with its charm, inflaming it with passion and desire. Thus the mind is seized by desire for the beauty which it recognizes as good, and, if it allows itself to be guided by what its senses tell it, it falls into the gravest errors and judges that the body is the chief cause of the beauty which it enshrines, and so to enjoy that beauty it must necessarily achieve with it as intimate a union as possible. But this is untrue; and anyone who thinks to enjoy that beauty by possessing the body is deceiving himself and is moved not by true knowledge, arrived at by rational choice, but by a false opinion derived from the desire of the senses. So the pleasure that follows is also necessarily false and deceptive. Consequently, all those lovers who satisfy their impure desires with the women they love meet with one of two evils: either as soon as they achieve the end they desire they experience satiety and distaste and even begin to hate what they love, as if their desire repented of its error and recognized the way it had been deceived by the false judgement of the senses, which had made it believe that evil was good; or else they are still troubled by the same avidity and desire, since they have not in fact attained the end they were seeking. Admittedly, confused by their short-sighted view of things, they imagine that they are experiencing pleasure, just as sometimes a sick man dreams that he is drinking from a clear fountain. Nevertheless, they enjoy neither rest nor satisfaction, and these

are precisely what they would enjoy as the natural consequences of desiring and then possessing what is good. On the contrary, deceived by the resemblance they see, they soon experience unbridled desire once more and in the same agitation as before they again find themselves with a raging and unquenchable thirst for what they hope to possess utterly. Lovers of this kind, therefore, are always most unhappy; for either they never attain their desires, and this causes them great misery, or if they do attain them they find themselves in terrible distress, and their wretchedness is even greater. For both at the beginning and during the course of this love of theirs they never know other than anguish, torment, sorrow, exertion and distress; and so lovers, it is supposed, must always be characterized by paleness and dejection, continuous sighings and weepings, mournfulness and lamentations, silences and the desire for death.

‘We see, therefore, that the senses are the chief cause of this desolation of the spirit; and they are at their full strength in youth, when they are stimulated by the urges of the flesh which sap a man’s powers of reason in exact proportion to their own vigour and so easily persuade the soul to yield to desire. For since it is sunk in an earthly prison and deprived of spiritual contemplation, the soul cannot of itself clearly perceive the truth when it is carrying out its duties of governing the body. So in order to understand things properly it must appeal to the senses for its first notions. In consequence it believes whatever they tell it and respects and trusts them, especially when they are so vigorous that they almost compel it; and because the senses are deceptive they fill the soul with errors and mistaken ideas. As a result, young men are invariably absorbed by this sensual kind of love and wholly rebellious against reason, and so they make themselves unworthy of enjoying the blessings and advantages that love gives to its true devotees; and the only pleasures they experience in love are the same as those enjoyed by unreasoning animals, though the distress they suffer is far more terrible than theirs. Therefore on this premise, which I insist is the absolute truth, I argue that lovers who are more mature in age experience the contrary; for in their case the soul is no longer so weighed down by the body and their natural ardour has begun to cool, and so if they are inflamed by beauty and their desire for it is guided by rational choice, they are not deceived and they possess completely the beauty they love. Consequently its possession brings them nothing but good, since beauty is goodness and so the true love of beauty is good and holy and always benefits those in whose souls the bridle of reason restrains the iniquity of the senses; and this is something the old can do far more easily than the young.

‘So it is not unreasonable to argue also that the old can love blamelessly and more happily than the young, accepting that by old we do not mean those who are senile or whose bodily organs have grown so feeble that the soul cannot perform its operations through them, but men whose intellectual powers are still in their prime. I must also add this: namely, that in my opinion although sensual love is bad at every age, yet in the young it may be excused and perhaps in some sense even permitted. For although it brings them afflictions, dangers, exertions and all the unhappiness we have mentioned, yet there are many who perform worthy acts in order to win the favour of the women whom they love, and though these acts are not directed to a good end they are good in themselves. And so from all that bitterness they extract a little sweetness, and the adversities they endure finally teach them the error of their ways. So just as I think those young people who subdue their desires and love in a rational manner are truly heroic, I excuse those who allow themselves to be overcome by the sensual love to which human weakness inclines them, provided that they then display gentleness, courtesy, worthiness and all the other qualities these gentlemen mentioned, and that when they are no longer young they abandon it completely and leave sensual desire behind them, as the lowest rung of the ladder by which we can ascend to true love. But no blame is too severe for those who when they are old still allow the fires of passion to burn in their cold hearts and make strong reason obey their feeble senses; for they deserve the endless shame of being numbered like idiots among the animals which lack reason, because the thoughts and ways of sensual love are wholly unbecoming to men of mature years.’

...

‘Gentlemen, beauty is a sacred thing, and I should not wish any of us to act like profane and sacrilegious men in speaking ill of it and thereby incurring the wrath of God. So as a warning for signor Morello and Federico, lest they are punished in the way most suitable for those who despise beauty, and lose their sight like Stesichorus, I say that beauty springs from God and is like a circle, the centre of which is goodness. And so just as one cannot have a circle without a centre, so one cannot have beauty without goodness. In consequence, only rarely does an evil soul dwell in a beautiful body, and so outward beauty is a true sign of inner goodness. This loveliness, indeed, is impressed upon the body in varying degrees as a token by which the soul can be recognized for what it is, just as with trees the beauty of the blossom testifies to the goodness of the fruit. The same is true of the human body, as we know from the way physiognomists often establish a man’s character and sometimes

even his thoughts from his countenance. Moreover, even in animals the qualities of the soul as far as possible impress themselves upon the body and can be perceived from their physical appearance. Consider how clearly we can perceive anger, ferocity and pride in the face of the lion, the horse and the eagle; and a pure and simple innocence in lambs and doves; evil guile in foxes and wolves, and so with nearly all the animals.

...

Bembo smiled and said: 'There can be no answer to this argument.'

Then he added: 'It also often happens that, like the other senses, our sight can be deceived and can judge to be beautiful a face that is not so at all. For example some women occasionally display in their eyes and looks a certain enticing and suggestive immodesty which is called beauty by many who find these traits pleasing because they promise them the chance of gaining what they desire. But in truth this is simply meretricious impudence, and unworthy of so honoured and sacred a name.'

Pietro Bembo then fell silent, but he was urged to say more about this kind of love and about the true way in which beauty should be enjoyed; and at length he said:

'I think I have shown clearly enough that old men can be happier in love than the young; and this was my premise. So it is not for me to add any more.'

Count Lodovico replied: 'You have demonstrated the unhappiness of the young better than the happiness of the old, whom you have not yet taught what path to follow in love but merely instructed to let themselves be guided by reason. And many people consider that it is impossible to reconcile love with reason.'

Bembo was still determined to say no more, but the Duchess begged that he should do so, and therefore he continued:

'It would be too unfortunate for humanity if our soul, in which such ardent desire can so easily arise, were forced to find nourishment only in what it has in common with the animals and could not direct its desire to its nobler element. So, as this is your wish, I will not refuse to discuss this noble theme. And since I know that I am unworthy to speak of Love's sacred mysteries, I pray him so to inspire my thoughts and words that I can teach this excellent courtier of ours how to love in a manner beyond the capacity of the vulgar crowd. And because I have since boyhood dedicated my life to him, may my words now conform to this intention and redound to his credit. I maintain, then, that since in youth human nature is so inclined to the senses, while the courtier is young he may be allowed to love in a sensual manner; but if in more mature years he

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should be inflamed with this amorous desire, he must proceed with circumspection and take care not to deceive himself or let himself experience the distress which in young men deserves compassion rather than blame but in old men blame rather than compassion.

“Therefore when he sets eyes on some beautiful and attractive woman, with charming ways and gentle manner, and being skilled in love recognizes that his spirit responds to hers, as soon as he notices that his eyes fasten on her image and carry it to his heart and his soul begins to take pleasure in contemplating her and feels an influx that gradually arouses and warms it, and those vivacious spirits shining from her eyes constantly add fresh fuel to the fire, then he should at the very beginning procure a swift remedy and alert his reason in order to defend with its help the fortress of his heart, and so close the passes to the senses and to desire that they cannot enter either by force or deception. If the flame is extinguished, so is the danger. But if it perseveres or grows, then in the knowledge that he has been captured the courtier should determine to eschew all the ugliness of vulgar passion and guided by reason set forth on the path of divine love. Then first he must reflect that the body in which beauty shines is not the source from which it springs, and on the contrary that beauty, being incorporeal and, as we have said, a ray of the supernatural, loses much of its nobility when fused with base and corruptible matter: for the more perfect it is, the less matter it contains, and it is most perfect when completely separated from matter. He must also reflect that just as a man cannot hear with his palate or smell with his ears, beauty can in no way be enjoyed nor can the desire it arouses in our souls be satisfied through the sense of touch but solely through what has beauty for its true object, namely, the faculty of sight. So he should ignore the blind judgement of these senses and enjoy with his eyes the radiance, the grace, the loving ardour, the smiles, the mannerisms and all the other agreeable adornments of the woman he loves. Similarly, let him use his hearing to enjoy the sweetness of her voice, the modulation of her words and, if she is a musician, the music she plays. In this way, through the channels of these two faculties, which have little to do with corporeal things and are servants of reason, he will nourish his soul on the most delightful food and will not allow desire for the body to arouse in him any appetite that is at all impure. Next, with the greatest reverence the lover should honour, please and obey his lady, cherish her even more than himself, put her convenience and pleasure before his own, and love the beauty of her soul no less than that of her body. He should, therefore, be at pains to keep her from going astray and by his wise

precepts and admonishments always seek to make her modest, temperate and truly chaste; and he must ensure that her thoughts are always pure and unsullied by any trace of evil. And thus, by sowing virtue in the garden of her lovely soul, he will gather the fruits of faultless behaviour and experience exquisite pleasure from their taste. And this will be the true engendering and expression of beauty in beauty, which some say is the purpose of love. In this manner, our courtier will be most pleasing to his lady, and she will always be submissive, charming and affable and as anxious to please him as she is to be loved by him; and the desires of both will be very pure and harmonious, and consequently they will be perfectly happy.’

Then signor Morello remarked: ‘In reality, this engendering of beauty in beauty must mean the begetting of a beautiful child in a beautiful woman; and it would seem to me a far clearer sign that she loved her lover if she pleased him in this than if she treated him merely with the affability you mention.’

Bembo laughed and replied: ‘You mustn’t go beyond the bounds, signor Morello; nor indeed does a woman grant just a token of affection when she gives her lover her beauty, which is precious to her, and along the paths into her soul, namely, sight and hearing, sends the glances of her eyes, the image of her face, her voice and her words, which penetrate her lover’s heart and convey the proof of her love.’

Signor Morello then said: ‘Glances and words can be false witnesses, and often are. So anyone who has no better pledge of love is in my opinion most uncertain; and truly I was expecting you to make this lady of yours a little more courteous and generous towards the courtier than the Magnifico made his. However, I think both of you are acting in the same way as those judges who pronounce sentence against their own people in order to seem wise.’

‘I am perfectly willing,’ Bembo continued, ‘for this lady to be far more courteous to my elderly courtier than signor Magnifico’s lady is to the young courtier. And this is with good reason, for my courtier will wish only for seemly things, all of which she may therefore concede to him quite innocently. But the Magnifico’s lady, who is not so certain of the young courtier’s modesty, should concede him only what is seemly and deny him what is not. Therefore my courtier, who obtains all he asks for, is happier than the other, who is granted some of his requests but refused others. And to help you understand even better that rational love is happier than sensual love, I say that sometimes the same things should be denied in sensual love and granted in rational love, because in the

former context they are unseemly, and in the latter, seemly. Thus to please her gracious lover, besides granting him pleasant smiles, intimate and secret conversations, and the liberty to joke and jest and touch hands, the lady may very reasonably and innocently go so far as to grant a kiss, which in sensual love, according to the Magnifico's rules, is not permitted. For as a kiss is a union of body and soul, there is a risk that the sensual lover may incline more to the body than the soul; but the rational lover knows that although the mouth is part of the body nevertheless it provides a channel for words, which are the interpreters of the soul, and for the human breath or spirit. Consequently, the rational lover delights when he joins his mouth to that of the lady he loves in a kiss, not in order to arouse in himself any unseemly desire but because he feels that this bond opens the way for their souls which, attracted by their mutual desire, each pour themselves into the other's body in turn and so mingle that each of them possesses two souls, and it is as if a single spirit composed of the two governs their two bodies. So the kiss may be called a spiritual rather than physical union because it exerts such power over the soul that it draws it to itself and separates it from the body. For this reason, all chaste lovers desire a kiss as a union of souls; and thus when inspired to love Plato said that in kissing the soul comes to the lips in order to leave the body. And because the separation of the soul from things that are perceptible to the senses and its complete union with spiritual things can be signified by the kiss, in his inspired book of the *Song of Songs* Solomon says: "let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth", in order to express the wish that his soul be transported by divine love to the contemplation of celestial beauty and by its intimate union with this beauty might forsake the body.'

All were listening very attentively to what Bembo was saying; and then, after a moment's pause, he added:

'Since you have made me begin to teach the courtier who is no longer young about love that is truly happy, I want to lead him a little further still. For to stop at this point is very dangerous, because, as we have said several times already, the soul is strongly inclined towards the senses; and although reason may choose well in its operation and recognize that beauty does not arise from the body, and therefore act as a check to impure desires, yet the constant contemplation of physical beauty often perverts true judgement. And even if no other evil resulted from this, absence from the person one loves causes much suffering. This is because when beauty is physically present, its influx into the lover's soul brings him intense pleasure, and by warming his heart it arouses and melts certain

hidden and congealed powers which the warmth of love nourishes and causes to flow and well up round his heart and send through his eyes those spirits or most subtle vapours, composed of the purest and brightest part of the blood, to receive the image of her beauty and embellish it with a thousand varied adornments. In consequence, the soul is filled with wonder and delight; it is frightened and yet it rejoices; as if dazed, it experiences along with its pleasure the fear and reverence invariably inspired by sacred things, and it believes it has entered into its Paradise.

“Therefore the lover who is intent only on physical beauty loses all this good and happiness as soon as the woman he loves by her absence leaves his eyes deprived of their splendour and, consequently, his soul widowed of its good. For, since her beauty is far away, there is no influx of affection to warm his heart as it did when she was there, and so the openings of his body become arid and dry; yet the memory of her beauty still stirs the powers of his soul a little, so that they seek to pour those spirits forth. Although their paths are blocked and there is no exit for them, they still strive to depart, and thus tormented and enclosed they begin to prick the soul and cause it to suffer bitterly, as children do when the teeth begin to grow through their tender gums. This causes the tears, the sighs, the anguish and the torments of lovers, because the soul is in constant pain and turmoil and almost raging in fury until its cherished beauty appears once more; and then suddenly it is calmed and breathes again, and wholly absorbed it draws strength from the delicious food before it and wishes never to part from such a ravishing vision. Therefore, to escape the torment caused by absence and to enjoy beauty without suffering, with the help of reason the courtier should turn his desire completely away from the body to beauty alone. He should contemplate beauty as far as he is able in its own simplicity and purity, create it in his imagination as an abstraction distinct from any material form, and thus make it lovely and dear to his soul, and enjoy it there always, day and night and in every time and place, without fear of ever losing it; and he will always remember that the body is something altogether distinct from beauty, whose perfection it diminishes rather than enhances. In this way the courtier of ours who is no longer young will put himself out of reach of the anguish and distress invariably experienced by the young in the form of jealousy, suspicion, disdain, anger, despair and a certain tempestuous fury that occasionally leads them so much astray that some not only beat the women they love but take their own lives. He will do no injury to the husband, father, brothers or family of the lady he loves; he will cause her no shame; he will not be forced sometimes to drag his eyes

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away and curb his tongue for fear of revealing his desires to others; or to endure suffering when they part or during her absence. For he will always carry the treasure that is so precious to him safe in his heart; and by the power of his imagination he will also make her beauty far more lovely than it is in reality.

‘However, among all these blessings the lover will find one that is far greater still, if he will determine to make use of this love as a step by which to climb to another that is far more sublime; and this will be possible if he continually reflects how narrowly he is confined by always limiting himself to the contemplation of a single body. And so in order to escape from this confinement, he will gradually add so many adornments to his idea of beauty that, by uniting all possible forms of beauty in his mind, he will form a universal concept and so reduce all the many varieties to the unity of that single beauty which sheds itself over human nature as a whole. And thus he will come to contemplate not the particular beauty of a single woman but the universal beauty which adorns all human bodies: and then, dazzled by this greater light, he will not concern himself with the lesser; burning with a more perfect flame, he will feel little esteem for what he formerly prized so greatly. Now this stage of love, although so noble that few attain it, still cannot be called perfect. For the human imagination is a corporeal faculty and acquires knowledge only through the data supplied to it by the senses, and so it is not wholly purged of the darkness of material things. Thus although it may consider this universal beauty in the abstract and simply in itself, yet it perceives it not at all clearly nor within a certain ambiguity because of the affinities that the images it forms have with the body itself; and so those who reach this stage of love are like fledglings which on their feeble wings can lift themselves a little in flight but dare not stray far from the nest or trust themselves to the winds and the open sky.

‘Therefore when our courtier has arrived at this stage, even though he can be called most happy in comparison with those lovers who are still sunk in the miseries of sensual love, I wish him not to be satisfied but to move boldly onwards along the sublime path of love and follow his guide towards the goal of true happiness. So instead of directing his thoughts to the outward world, as those must do who wish to consider bodily beauty, let him turn within himself to contemplate what he sees with the eyes of the mind, which begin to be penetrating and clear-sighted once those of the body have lost the flower of their delight; and in this manner, having shed all evil, purged by the study of true philosophy,

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directed towards the life of the spirit, and practised in the things of the intellect, the soul turns to contemplate its own substance, and as if awakened from deepest sleep it opens the eyes which all men possess but few use and perceives in itself a ray of that light which is the true image of the angelic beauty that has been transmitted to it, and of which in turn it transmits a faint impression to the body. Thus, when it has become blind to earthly things, the soul opens its eyes wide to those of heaven; and sometimes when the faculties of the body are totally absorbed by assiduous contemplation, or bound to sleep, no longer hindered by their influence the soul tastes a certain hidden savour of the true angelic beauty, and ravished by the loveliness of that light it begins to burn and to pursue the beauty it sees so avidly that it seems almost drunk and beside itself in its desire to unite with it. For the soul then believes that it has discovered the traces of God, in the contemplation of which it seeks its final repose and bliss. And so, consumed in this most joyous flame, it ascends to its noblest part, which is the intellect; and there, no more overshadowed by the dark night of earthly things, it glimpses the divine beauty itself. Even so, it does not yet enjoy this perfectly, since it contemplates it only in its own particular intellect, which cannot comprehend universal beauty in all its immensity. And so, not even satisfied with bestowing this blessing, love gives the soul greater happiness still. For just as from the particular beauty of a single body it guides the soul to the universal beauty of all bodies, so, in the last stage of perfection, it guides the soul from the particular intellect to the universal intellect. And from there, aflame with the sacred fire of true divine love, the soul flies to unite itself with the angelic nature, and it not only abandons the senses but no longer has need of reason itself. For, transformed into an angel, it understands all intelligible things and without any veil or cloud it gazes on the wide sea of pure divine beauty, which it receives into itself to enjoy the supreme happiness the senses cannot comprehend.

‘The kinds of beauty which every day we see in corruptible bodies with these clouded eyes of ours (and which even so are only dreams and faint shadows) appear to be so lovely and graceful that they often kindle in us a most ardent fire and cause such delight that we count no happiness the equal of what we sometimes feel because of a single glance we may receive from the eyes of the woman we love, so what happy wonder, what blessed awe must we think is that which possesses the soul when it attains the vision of divine beauty! What sweet flame, what ravishing fire must we believe that to be which springs from the source of supreme and true beauty, the fountain of all other beauty which never increases or

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diminishes! Always beautiful; most simple of itself and equally in all its parts; like only to itself and sharing in nothing other than itself; it is yet so beautiful that all other beautiful things derive their beauty from it. And this is the beauty indistinguishable from the highest good, which by its light calls and draws all things to it and which not only gives intellect to intellectual beings, reason to rational beings and the senses and the desire for life to sensual beings, but also transmits to the very plants and rocks, as an imprint of itself, motion and the instinct of their own particular nature. This love, therefore, is as greater and happier than the others as the cause that produces it is greater. And thus, just as material fire refines gold, so this most sacred fire consumes and destroys everything that is mortal in our souls and quickens and beautifies the celestial part which previously, because of the senses, was dead and buried. This is the pyre on which the poets write that Hercules was burned on the summit of Mount Oeta and through whose fire he became divine and immortal after death; this is the burning bush of Moses, the parted tongues of fire, the fiery chariot of Elias, which doubles the grace and happiness of those souls worthy to see it, when it leaves the earth below and flies towards heaven. So let us direct all the thoughts and powers of our soul towards this most sacred light which shows us the path that leads to heaven; and following after it and divesting ourselves of the human passions in which we were clothed when we fell, let us ascend by the ladder whose lowest rung bears the image of sensual beauty to the sublime mansion where dwells the celestial, adorable and true beauty which lies hidden in the secret recesses of the Almighty where profane eyes may not see it. And here we shall find a most happy end to our desires, true rest from our labours, a sure remedy for our miseries, a wholesome medicine for our infirmities, a most safe harbour from the raging storms of the tempestuous sea of this life.

‘O most sacred Love, what tongue is there that can praise you worthily? Full of beauty, goodness and wisdom, you flow from the union of beauty, goodness and divine wisdom, there you dwell, and through it you return to it perpetually. Graciously binding the universe together, midway between celestial and earthy things, by your benign disposition you direct the heavenly powers in their government of the lower, and turning the minds of men to their source, you unite them with it. You unite the elements in harmony, inspire Nature to produce, and move all that is born to the perpetuation of life. You join together the things that are separate, give perfection to the imperfect, likeness to the unlike, friendship to the hostile, fruit to the earth, tranquillity to the sea, its

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life-giving light to the sky. You are the father of true pleasures, of all blessings, of peace, of gentleness and of good will; the enemy of rough savagery and vileness; the beginning and the end of every good. And since you delight to inhabit the flower of beautiful bodies and beautiful souls, and there sometimes consent to reveal a little of yourself to those worthy to see you, I believe that you now dwell here among us. Consent then, O Lord, to hear our prayers, pour yourself into our hearts, and with the radiance of your most sacred fire illumine our darkness and like a trusted guide show us the right path through this blind maze. Correct the falsity of our senses, and after our long delirium give us the true substance of goodness. Quicken our intellects with the incense of spirituality and make us so attuned to the celestial harmony that there is no longer room within us for any discord of passion. Inebriate our souls at the inexhaustible fountain of contentment that always delights and never satiates and that gives a taste of true blessedness to whoever drinks from its living and limpid waters. With the rays of your light cleanse our eyes of their misty ignorance, so that they may no longer prize mortal beauty but know that the things which they first thought to see are not, and that those they did not see truly are. Accept the sacrifice of our souls; and burn them in the living flame that consumes all earthly dross, so that wholly freed from the body they may unite with divine beauty in a sweet and perpetual bond and that we, liberated from our own selves, like true lovers can be transformed into the object of our love and soar above the earth to join the feast of the angels, where, with ambrosia and immortal nectar for our food, we may at last die a most happy death in life, as did those ancient Fathers whose souls, by the searing power of contemplation, you ravished from their bodies to unite with God.'

Having spoken in that way with such vehemence that he seemed transported out of himself, Bembo then remained silent and still, looking towards heaven, as if dazed. And then signora Emilia, who together with all the others had listened to all he had to say with the utmost attention, plucked the hem of his robe and said:

'Take care, Pietro, that with these thoughts of yours you too do not cause your soul to leave your body.'

'Madam,' answered Pietro, 'that would not be the first miracle that love has worked in me.'

Then the Duchess and all the others began once again to insist that Bembo should continue his discourse; and everyone almost seemed to feel in his mind a spark of the divine love that had inspired Bembo himself. They were all anxious to hear more, but he then added:

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‘Gentlemen, I have said all that was dictated to me on the spur of the moment by the holy frenzy of love. And now that its inspiration seems to have failed, I would not know what to say; and I think that love does not wish its secrets to be revealed any further, or that the courtier should pass beyond the stage I have been graciously permitted to show him; and so perhaps I may speak no further about this subject.’